HOUSEKEEPER OF THE CITY

A Novella of Untamed Architectural Characters
and the Children Who Set Them Free

by

Surjan

with imagery conceived, 3D modeled in Rhino 3D,
and rendered in V-Ray by the author

text co-authored with the assistance of AI

for the island of Manhattan
in the suspended time of a pandemic

For the children who looked out of windows,
and for every inner child who is still there,
waiting at the glass.

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a walk through the playhouse

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Foreword

A House That Watches the City Rediscover Itself

There are books one reads, and there are books one moves through the way a child moves through a house — running a hand along the wainscoting, pausing at a window, tilting a head at something that should not be where it is, and then, accepting it, carrying on. The novella you are holding is the second kind of book. You are invited to move through it slowly. You are invited to pause.

When Surjan first showed me the drawings that became this project — the chromatic, paisley-patterned, cathedral-arched creatures they had modeled in Rhino and rendered in V-Ray during a period when so many of us were modeling and rendering nothing at all — I confess I did not at first understand what I was seeing. A tower wearing a purple scalloped dress. A building with a topknot. A forest of what looked like golden, swaying chandeliers on stilts. I understood them the way one understands a word in a language one does not yet speak: one hears the music before the meaning. The meaning comes later, if one is patient.

The meaning, as it turned out, was nothing less than an argument about what architecture is for. Architecture, on Surjan's reading, is not the science of making boxes. It is not even the art of organizing walls. Architecture, they propose, is a form of housekeeping — the tending of a city's inner life — and the architect, properly understood, is not a solver of problems but a maker of hope. This is a soft-spoken and radical claim. If you follow it where it leads, it will rearrange what you think a building is supposed to do.

The premise of the novella is as simple as a fairy tale and as complicated as a symphony. There is a playhouse. It sits on the southern edge of Central Park, at 59th Street, looking north into the green. Inside the playhouse is a child, or perhaps several children, or perhaps the architect in the part of themselves that has not yet forgotten how to climb on chairs. The playhouse has four façades, each painted a single color — orange, blue, yellow, pink — and each pierced with arched windows. Through those windows, one at a time, the city reveals itself. It is not the silent, locked-down, monochrome city the grown-ups remember. It is a city that has been, the whole time, populated by untamed architectural characters — the MISFITS, the DINGBATS, the BLOWUPS, and the DOODADS — going about their cheerful, patterned, impossible business. Only the children can see them at first. Only the children, the story suggests, ever could.

What one notices, reading through, is that Surjan has taken the vocabulary of the architectural avant-garde — the dingbats of Reyner Banham's Los Angeles, the blowups of the 1960s inflatable movements, the misfit follies of the postmodernists, the ornamental doodads that a certain strain of modernism spent a century trying to bully out of the discipline — and handed these words to children as if they were the names of pets. The vocabulary softens. It becomes affectionate. What had been a technical lexicon becomes a bestiary. And the

bestiary, in turn, becomes a moral argument: that the diversity of a city's forms ought to mirror the diversity of its people, and that any architecture that forgets this has forgotten something important about what it is for.

I want to say something here about the imagery itself, because the imagery is the soul of this project and deserves to be met on its own terms. Every one of the plates you will encounter in these pages was made by Surjan without the assistance of artificial intelligence. Each character — every MISFIT, every DINGBAT, every BLOWUP, every DOODAD — was conceived by hand and mind, modeled volumetrically in Rhino 3D, and rendered in V-Ray with all the labor and patience that such software demands of a human being. The patterns that cover these creatures — the paisleys, the scales, the herringbones, the pomegranates in full bloom — were assembled by Surjan and applied to surfaces the way a dressmaker drapes cloth. These are not images that could have been produced by prompting a machine. They are images that could only have been produced by a person who had already spent years looking at the city and asking what it was missing.

The text is a different matter, and Surjan has been careful, in the Introduction that follows, to say so. The text of this novella was composed in conversation with an AI, an iterative collaboration in which Surjan shaped the voice, the arc, and the governing ideas, and the machine assisted in the shaping of sentences. This division of labor — imagery entirely human, text co-authored with a machine — is itself a statement about where a human sensibility is, at the present moment, most indispensable. It is indispensable in vision. It is indispensable in the act of deciding what should be seen. The sentences can be helped along. The seeing cannot.

Readers who know Surjan's work will recognize in this novella the continuation of a decade-long argument. Surjan, who is genderqueer and non-binary, has long been interested in the ways architecture encodes or refuses to encode the full range of human identities. The city, as it is currently built, speaks a narrow vernacular. It tends to assume that everyone who enters it is built the same, dressed the same, moves through it the same, wants the same things from it. The untamed characters who populate this novella are a quiet insurgency against that assumption. The MISFITS, in particular, "speak the vernacular of compassion for individuals per freedom of expression" — a phrase Surjan has been known to recite the way other architects recite Le Corbusier. It is worth reciting. It is worth pinning to a wall.

One should also say, and the novella itself says it repeatedly, that the moment of this work's composition matters. This is a novella of the pandemic — not the COVID-19 pandemic as news, but the pandemic as a structure of feeling, as a suspended time in which many of us lost, temporarily, the ability to imagine that the future would contain more than the present. In that suspended time, Surjan made a decision that is, I think, the secret heart of the project: they decided to make something for children. Not children as a target demographic, not children as a marketing problem, but children as the last remaining audience on earth who had not yet been taught to expect architecture to be boring. The novella is addressed, in a way, to that audience. It is also addressed to the part of each adult reader who was, once, that audience, and who, with some coaxing, may still know how to be.

You will find, interleaved with the prose, fifteen plates. These correspond to the fifteen boards of the original architectural portfolio from which this novella grew. You will find, at the end, a Catalogue of Plates describing each in detail, and a hand-drawn map of Manhattan showing where on the island each of the four tribes roams. The playhouse, you will see, sits on Central Park South. This is not an accident. The park is the green heart of the island, and the playhouse faces it the way a child faces a garden.

There is one last thing I want to say, and I want to say it plainly. This is a bright book. It is a sunny book. It is a book full of what Surjan calls, without embarrassment, radical joy. In an era when a great deal of serious cultural production has decided that the only honest response to a difficult world is a despairing one, Surjan has taken the opposite and much harder position: that hope is a discipline, that beauty is a civic responsibility, and that a city that cannot imagine its own flourishing will not, in the end, flourish. The untamed architectural characters in these pages are the form this conviction takes. They are absurd. They are marvelous. They are what the architect built in the house of their imagination while the world outside held its breath.

Turn the page. The children are already at the windows.

— The Editor Manhattan, in the year the city began to remember itself

Introduction

A Note from the Author on How This Book Was Made

I want to begin by telling you how this book was made, because how a thing is made is, in some sense, what the thing is.

The images came first. This is important to say clearly. Every image in these pages — every MISFIT, every DINGBAT, every BLOWUP, every DOODAD, every panorama of the untamed parade pouring over Central Park — was made by me, by hand and by mind, long before any sentence of this novella existed. I conceived each character. I built each one volumetrically in Rhinoceros 3D, pulling surfaces through space the way one might pull a sheet across a bed. I gave each one a skin — the paisleys and pomegranates and checkerboards and scales that clothe them — and I rendered each scene in V-Ray, which is a kind of patient, honest engine that takes however long it takes and then shows you what you made. Some of these renders took hours. Some took days. Not one of them came from a prompt.

I mention this because we live in a strange moment for imagery, and I want to be exact about what I did and what I did not do. I did not ask a machine to imagine these creatures for me. The creatures were already in me, patient, waiting for the software to catch up. What I asked of the software was to carry them into visible form. The software is a collaborator in the same way a chisel is a collaborator with a sculptor. It does not choose what to make. It helps the hand do what the hand already intends.

The text is another matter, and I want to be exact about it as well. The sentences you are about to read were composed by me in collaboration with an artificial intelligence. I shaped the voice. I set the structure. I decided what the novella would say and what it would refuse to say. I read every paragraph and rewrote the ones that did not sound like me. But the AI was there, as a thinking partner, helping me find phrasings, helping me test whether a paragraph was earning its keep, helping me say in one sentence what I had been trying to say in three. I am not ashamed of this. I am also not diminished by it. The book is mine. The collaboration was one of the tools I used to make the book mine.

The reason the labor divides this way — imagery entirely my own, text co-authored with a machine — is that I believe the imagination, in our present moment, has one indispensable residence, and that residence is the human body. The decision about what to see — the decision about which fantasies to grant visible form — cannot be outsourced. A machine asked to imagine a hopeful building in a city under pandemic will imagine, on average, a hopeful building on a city under pandemic. It will give you the average of everyone else's imaginings. What I wanted was not the average. What I wanted was these particular creatures, with these particular dresses, walking through this particular city. For that, the labor had to be mine.

I want to tell you what I was doing, during the time this project came into being. I was, like many people, at home. I was watching a city I loved become a city I could no longer recognize — not because it was different but because it was emptied. Manhattan in the early months of the pandemic was a photograph of itself with nobody inside. The streets were still there. The buildings were still there. The sky, which is really what Manhattan's streets are about — the long vertical columns of sky between the towers — the sky was still there. But the people were gone, and without the people, the architecture lost its meaning. A city, I came to understand, is not a collection of buildings. A city is a collection of people moving among buildings. When the moving stopped, the buildings became stage sets for a play that had been cancelled.

What can an architect do during a cancelled play? One answer — the professionally reasonable one — is to wait. Another answer, the one I stumbled into and could not let go of, is to build the play that has not been cancelled. To build, in the imagination, the city that the empty city had forgotten it could be. I began to draw characters. I began to model them. I began to ask questions like: what would a building look like if it were allowed to dress however it wanted? What if a tower had a topknot? What if an apartment block wore a pattern of pomegranates? What if the old dead word "dingbat," which Reyner Banham used for the sad stucco apartment buildings of 1960s Los Angeles, could be rehabilitated into the name of a species of helpful architectural creature that snuck up beside old buildings and cheered them up? What if "doodad," the dismissive name for ornament, could be taken seriously as a way of designing?

The characters multiplied. I gave them names borrowed from the lexicon of architectural insults — the things modernism had called the enemies of good design — and I let them become the protagonists instead of the villains. MISFITS. DINGBATS. BLOWUPS. DOODADS. Four tribes of untamed, joyful, over-dressed architecture, each with its own role to play in a city's recovery. And because an architect needs a place from which to see such things, I built them a playhouse. The playhouse is on Central Park South, at 59th Street, facing north into the green. It has four façades, one in each of the four tribal colors, and each façade is pierced with arched windows. Through the windows, the tribes can be seen going about their work — if one knows how to look, and the children always do.

The children are the other protagonists of this book. I did not, in the beginning, set out to write a book for children, and I am not sure this is exactly a children's book in the end. It is a book in which children do the seeing, and in which the adults who have lost the capacity for seeing are invited to borrow the children's eyes. There are pixies in the book, because when I was designing the characters I realized that they needed an in-between species, something smaller than architecture and larger than a thought, to carry wishes between the tribes and the inhabitants of the city. The pixies are not anthropomorphized insects or tiny winged people. The pixies are something closer to the pattern of attention that children pay to the world — a kind of intelligence that moves easily between the visible and the imagined. Only children can hear the pixies. This is not because adults are deaf. It is because adults have stopped listening at that frequency.

I want to say, one last time, why I made this. I made this because I am an architect and I wanted to do my job, and the job of an architect — as I understand it, and as this book will argue in every possible way — is to keep house for a city. To tend to its morale. To make hope and desire visible. A city in crisis, like any household in crisis, needs someone to open the windows, shake out the rugs, water the plants, and say, aloud, that the world is still beautiful and that we will be all right. That person does not have to be the mayor. That person does not have to be an elected official. That person can be an architect, working in their own apartment, building impossible buildings in Rhino and rendering them in V-Ray, sentence by sentence, render by render, in the suspended time of a pandemic.

The playhouse is ready. The children are already at the windows. I am going to step aside now and let them show you what they can see.

Welcome in.

— Surjan

The architect is the housekeeper of the city. As a housekeeper, the architect doesn't just solve problems. They also create hope and desire.
In isolation, the architect designs fantasies of their imagination to build a playhouse full of possibilities within the city. This playhouse is free of all gravitational forces. Therefore, it is suspended in a timeless place, awaiting an audience willing to accept it without reservations.
The COVID-19 pandemic has created such a condition—one in which the architect needs to assemble fantasies for a forgotten audience, our children.
This portfolio expands one playhouse, seen through a child's eyes looking outward from its windows, designed to reveal a city full of wild architectural characters. The playhouse's four elevations have been color-coded (Orange, Blue, Yellow & Pink) to specify the architectural characters with children's names. Orange facades are MISFITS, Blue is DINGBATS, Yellow is BLOWUPS, and Pink are DOODADS. As the series of MISFITS, DINGBATS, BLOWUPS, and DOODADS are sequentially revealed through eleven sets of windows, the children rediscover the city, and, just as importantly, the architect rediscovers their inner child. This discovery is an unexpected gift in the pandemic's suspended time, one ready to be unpackaged for all ages.
The parade of these untamed architectural characters wandering throughout the city is not a carnival; it's a time machine! This time machine moves forward, backward, and ahead. Once again, it is a means of housekeeping that the architects must tend to for the city's current and future generations. This portfolio reveals the architect as a mindful housekeeper of the city by allowing the visions seen from the playhouse to fuel all future constructed projects.
'The city has forsaken its identity.
It has become an onlooker instead of a participant, an isolated soul amidst millions of isolated souls.
But children withdraw from this paradox.
They discover its identity against all odds.'

Plate I

Chapter One

The Architect is the Housekeeper of the City

On the morning the city went quiet, the architect stood at the window of a small apartment on Central Park South and understood, for the first time in a long career, that there was nothing in particular to do.

This was a feeling the architect had never encountered before. For as long as they could remember, there had been drawings to finish and meetings to attend and consultants to argue with and clients to placate and contractors to coax and a great deal of email, most of it in a tone of barely suppressed panic. The architect had learned, over the years, to move through each day the way a swimmer moves through a rough sea — arms working, head just above the surface, eyes fixed on some distant point of land. To swim was to be an architect. To be an architect was to swim. And here, suddenly, was a morning in which the sea had gone still. The architect was still kicking. But there was nowhere, for the moment, to swim to.

The city below was in a similar condition. One could see it from the apartment window: the long gray avenue of Central Park South running east and west, the yellow cabs standing idle at the curb like so many dozing canaries, the doormen at the prewar buildings across the street leaning on their brass carts in a posture that was new for them, a posture of not-knowing-what-to-do. Beyond the doormen, beyond the yellow cabs, beyond the low stone wall at the park's southern edge, was the park itself — Olmsted's green improbable masterpiece — and beyond the park, rising through the early haze, the long march of towers that marched north up the island and kept on marching until they thinned to nothing at the river. All of it looked the same as it had looked the week before. Nothing had been knocked down. Nothing had been evacuated. And yet everything was different, because the thing that made the city a city had quietly gone somewhere else.

The thing that made the city a city, the architect had always believed, was the fact that people were in it. A city was not its buildings. A city was the pattern of attention a million people paid to each other, every day, as they moved among the buildings. When that pattern slackened, the buildings stood stranded, like actors waiting for a rehearsal that had been cancelled. You could see the strandedness of the buildings if you looked carefully. The architect was looking carefully. The architect was beginning to look more carefully than they had looked in years.

And something curious happened, the longer the architect looked, which was this: the architect began to remember that they had been, once, a child. Not in the abstract way adults remember being children — by flipping through an album of events — but in the specific, inhabited way, the way one remembers a smell. The architect remembered being small enough to fit on a windowsill. The architect remembered the particular posture of a child at a window, which is a posture of total curiosity, the body pressed to the glass, the nose leaving a smudge. The architect remembered that when they were that small, the city outside the window had not been a collection of buildings doing what buildings do. The city had been a crowd of characters going about their lives, like the people in a picture book. The buildings had had faces. The buildings had had opinions. The buildings had had, in the architect's childhood imagination, something very close to souls.

Somewhere along the line of adulthood, the architect had stopped believing this. It was not a dramatic renunciation. It was a gentle one. The architect had been trained, in school, to understand that buildings were problems to be solved — that architecture was the rational assembly of programs and the efficient resolution of structural loads. The architect had gotten very good at these things. The architect had also, without noticing, gotten very good at not seeing what a small child sees out of a window, which is that the city is made of creatures and that all of them want to be noticed.

Now the city had gone quiet, and in the quiet the creatures were stirring again. The architect could feel them stirring the way one feels a cat moving beneath a blanket. There. And there. And there. A purple scalloped dress on a tower one never remembered seeing before. A tiny topknot at the crown of an apartment block. A string of little paisley pods hovering just above a rooftop, as if the rooftop had sprouted berries. The architect blinked. The blinking did not make them go away.

This, the architect thought, is what happens when you stop being in a hurry. The creatures come back.

The architect took down, from a shelf above the desk, a pad of drawing paper and a pen. The hand remembered what to do before the mind caught up. The first character appeared on the page in seventeen minutes — a strange, friendly, patterned thing with scalloped edges and no particular resemblance to anything that had ever been built. The architect looked at it and laughed. It had been a long time since the architect's hand had made something that had caused the architect to laugh.

On the second day, there were more characters. On the third day, more. On the seventh day, the architect stopped drawing on paper and opened the software in which buildings are properly modeled — Rhinoceros

3D, familiar as an old kitchen knife — and began to pull the creatures through space in three dimensions. By the end of the second week, the architect had a small catalogue. By the end of the second month, the catalogue had grown into a small city.

The creatures, the architect came to understand, fell into four tribes. The tribes had names. The names were words that architecture had, in an earlier and more serious period, used as insults. The architect was reclaiming the insults the way a child reclaims a nickname. The tribes were: the MISFITS, who were low to the ground, garden-dwelling, and gentle, with patterns like embroidered pillows and wings like aviaries for pixies. The DINGBATS, who were shy, and hid themselves against the sides of existing buildings, and who — given time — began to accumulate into towers unto themselves. The BLOWUPS, who floated like enormous embroidered balloons ballasted by tubular armatures of hedgerow, and who made their courtyards into classrooms. And the DOODADS, who were rare and precious and only appeared in the aftermath of calamity, and who wore golden coronets that caught the sun.

That was the taxonomy. But taxonomy was not the point. The point was that the architect, having made these creatures, realized they needed somewhere to put them. They needed a house. Not a house to live in — the creatures did not need houses — but a house from which to be seen. A house from which a person standing at a window could, if they were willing, watch the whole untamed parade go by.

And so the architect designed a playhouse. The playhouse was the modest center of the whole imagined city, a building small enough to fit in the footprint of a parked delivery truck. It had four façades, one facing in each direction — orange to the south, blue to the east, yellow to the north, and pink to the west. Each façade was the color of one of the four tribes. Each façade was pierced with arched windows, many of them, in a kind of cheerful irregular rhythm. And through each set of windows, if you pressed your nose to the glass, you could see the tribe whose color the wall wore. Misfits out the orange side. Dingbats out the blue. Blowups out the yellow. Doodads out the pink.

The playhouse was, the architect understood, a machine. Specifically, it was a time machine. It moved the person inside it both backward (to the state of perception in which one was small enough to see the creatures at all) and forward (to the state of the city as it could yet become). It did all of this by doing nothing — by sitting very still on Central Park South and letting the child inside it look out.

The architect placed the playhouse in imagination on Central Park South because that was where the architect lived, and because the architect needed to be able to walk the idea of the playhouse to the actual window every day and compare what the imagination held to what the glass framed. The playhouse was, one might say, across the street from itself. It was both inside the architect's apartment and across the street in the park, facing back at the apartment, looking at the architect the way the architect was looking at it. This was not a problem. This was the way imagined architecture works.

The playhouse, in its ideal form, was free of gravity. It was suspended in a timeless place, awaiting an audience willing to accept it without reservations. Adults would find this difficult. Adults, in general, have forgotten how to accept a suspended gravityless playhouse without reservations. But children could do it instantly. Children, upon seeing the playhouse, would climb inside without hesitation and press their noses to the glass and see, out the orange side, the MISFITS — and the story could begin.

The architect stood at the window on Central Park South and watched, for a long time, the silent city doing its silent thing. The creatures were stirring under the blanket. The playhouse was built in the architect's head. The children — some real, some not yet real, some remembered, some wished for — were already at the windows.

It was time, the architect understood, to be a proper housekeeper.

It was time to let the children look.

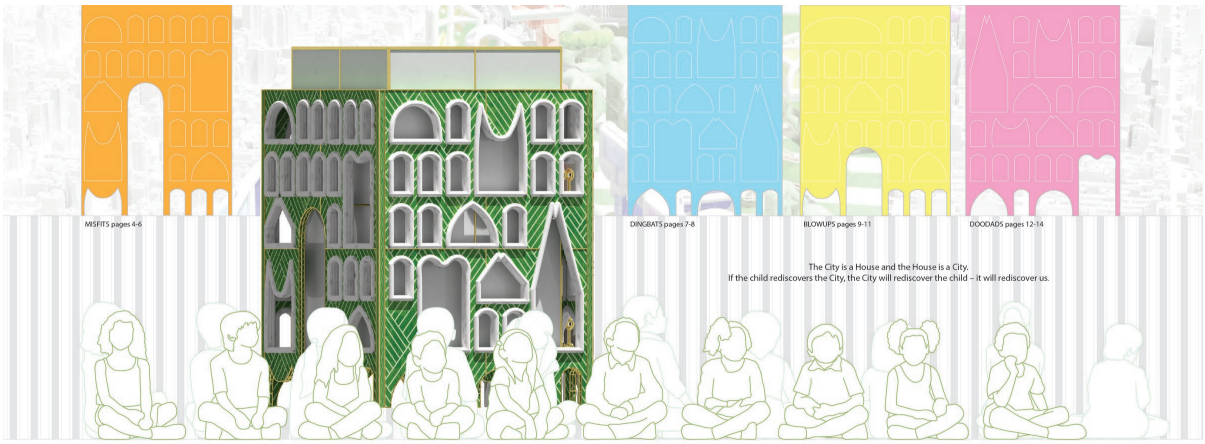

MISFITS pages 4-6
DINGBATS pages 7-8
BLOWUPS pages 9-11
DOODADS pages 12-14
The City is a House and the House is a City.
If the child rediscovers the City, the City will rediscover the child – it will rediscover us.

Plate II

Chapter Two

The City is a House and the House is a City

The first child to find the playhouse was a girl of about seven, whose hair was parted into two dark twists and who was wearing a pair of rubber boots on a day that did not call for rubber boots. Her name, let us say, was Asha. She had come from a brownstone several blocks to the east, having persuaded her aunt, who was in charge of her for the afternoon, to walk as far as the park's southern corner. The aunt, who was tired, had given in. The aunt was sitting on a bench now, checking her phone. Asha was off exploring.

It is worth saying, before Asha goes any further, that the playhouse was not, strictly speaking, there. It was there in the architect's imagination, which was a particular place of its own, but if one had walked along Central Park South that afternoon one would have seen no small four-faceted building with colored walls standing on the pavement. One would have seen only the pavement, the low wall of the park, the bare trees, and beyond them, deeper in, the leafless canopies against a sky that was trying to decide whether to be blue. The playhouse was visible only to those who had not yet been taught to expect it to be invisible.

Asha had not yet been taught. Asha saw it immediately.

She saw it as a small house — smaller than her school, larger than her dollhouse — sitting unattended on the wide gravel margin between the stone wall and the pavement, roughly where the carriage horses usually stood. It had four walls, each a different color. Someone had put arched windows in each wall, a crowd of them, and the arched windows looked inward into the house, which meant that from where Asha stood you could see through one set of windows to the other side. The house had a little green roof of slanted tiles, and there was something glittery above the roof, a shimmer in the air that was not exactly a bird and not exactly a reflection. There was nobody in it.

Asha thought about this carefully, the way seven-year-olds do. She had been told, many times, not to go into strange houses. She had also been told, many times, to use her imagination, which adults said in one tone when they meant it and in another tone when they meant please stop bothering me. The playhouse was a strange house, but it was also so clearly an imagination-house that Asha felt the first rule did not quite apply. She walked around it once. She touched the orange wall. It was warm. She touched the blue wall. It was cool. The yellow wall made her smile without her understanding why. She saved the pink wall for last. When she finally got to it, the pink wall was waiting for her, like a friend.

Asha went in.

Inside, the playhouse was larger than it had looked outside. Adults who later asked Asha about this would be told, with some impatience, that of course it was larger inside; that was how imagination houses worked; it was not complicated. The inside was all wood and painted plaster, and the four walls from in here showed themselves to be much higher than they had seemed. The floor was laid in dark planks, the kind that have been waxed and waxed and waxed. There were cushions on the floor. There was a small window seat built into each of the four walls. And the windows — oh, the windows — the windows were numerous and arched and full of light, and through each of the four sets of windows a different landscape could be seen.

Through the orange windows, Asha saw a wild garden.

Through the blue windows, she saw a street of old Manhattan buildings, to which strange little patterned things had attached themselves, like barnacles, as if the buildings had been walking through the ocean.

Through the yellow windows, she saw the park — but a park transformed, a park full of enormous embroidered balloons tethered by hedge-columns — a park of topiary rooms the size of buildings.

Through the pink windows, she saw a field of golden-coroneted strange swaying things, like enormous dandelions that had decided to grow up instead of being blown away.

Asha turned slowly in a full circle, looking from one set of windows to the next, and said, to nobody in particular, a thing that seven-year-olds sometimes say when the world is very good to them:

"Oh."

It was the best word she had, and she meant it.

Now the architect, who was across the street in the apartment on Central Park South, did not know any of this. The architect was watching the window, as usual, and making a cup of tea. The architect, if asked, would have said that they were designing a playhouse for nobody in particular, an imaginary playhouse for an imaginary audience. But the playhouse, once built in imagination, had begun to do what playhouses always do, which is to attract children who were not imaginary. Asha was inside it. Asha was looking through each set of windows in turn. Asha had begun, without knowing she had begun, to rediscover the city.

This is the first and most important secret of this entire book, which I would like to say now, plainly, so that we can keep saying it in many ways later.

The City is a House.

The House is a City.

If the child rediscovers the City, the City will rediscover the child.

If the City rediscovers the child, the City will rediscover itself.

And in rediscovering itself, the City will — slowly, and at first in ways only children can see — rediscover us.

Asha, looking through the blue windows at the strange little patterned things attached to the old brownstones, understood this in her bones even though she did not yet have the grown-up words for it. She understood that what she was seeing was a version of the city she already lived in, but that in this version the buildings had been allowed to wear whatever they wanted. The brownstones had permitted themselves to grow funny little tumors of ornament, which cheered them up. The tumors of ornament were cheerful. The brownstones were cheerful. The cheerfulness was spreading the way laughter spreads in a schoolyard at recess.

She moved to the orange windows. Out past the orange windows, low to the ground, were a series of little follies like huts for extravagant picnics. They had wings over them, sort of, made of wire and patterned fabric, and inside the wings, she could see, there were nests — nests full of little glimmers. The glimmers were pixies. Asha could see them because she was the right age. Pixies were what you saw when you were young enough to see them.

She moved to the yellow windows. The yellow windows showed the enormous topiary-rooms of the BLOWUPS in the park. She could see, through one of the arched openings in a topiary wall, a classroom — a proper classroom with benches and a teacher — and the teacher was a pixie, and the students were other pixies, and they were learning, Asha gathered, something important that had to do with spring.

She moved to the pink windows. The pink windows showed the DOODADS, who were the most beautiful. Their golden coronets were catching the light and scattering it down onto the grass. The grass under the DOODADS was pink grass, which Asha had never heard of before but which she now accepted on the authority of her own eyes. The grass was pink because the DOODADS had made it pink. The DOODADS were in the business of remaking what had been ordinary into what was new. They had not gone extinct, whatever the grown-ups feared. They had only been resting.

Asha stood in the middle of the playhouse for a long, long time — perhaps twenty minutes, which at seven years old is a geological age — and let the four landscapes look back at her. She knew, somehow, that she was being seen. Not by a person. By the city. The city was looking at her through each of the four sets of windows,

the way a face looks at itself in four mirrors at once, and the city was deciding, on the basis of her looking, whether to come back.

When she left the playhouse, which she did reluctantly, she did not tell her aunt what she had seen. Seven-year-olds are good at not telling their aunts. She walked back to the bench and took her aunt's hand, and her aunt, looking up from her phone, said, "All right, pumpkin? Ready to go?" And Asha said yes.

But she remembered the pink wall, because the pink wall had been waiting for her.

And the next day she came back.

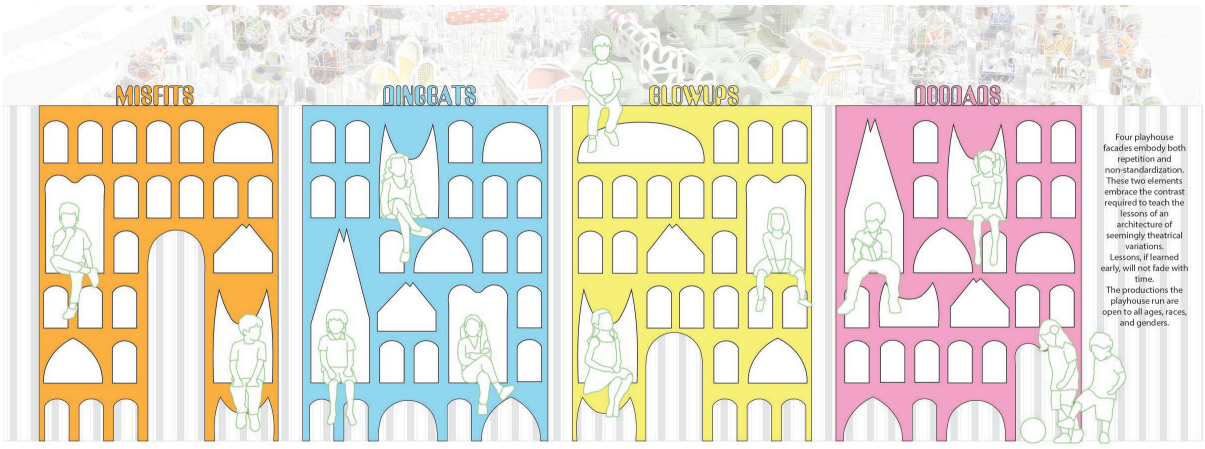

MISFITS
DINGBATS
GLOWUPS
DOODADS
Four playhouse facades embody both repetition and non-standardization. These two elements embrace the contrast required to teach the lessons of an architecture of seemingly theatrical variations. Lessons, if learned early, will not fade with time. The productions the playhouse run are open to all ages, races, and genders.

Plate III

Chapter Three

Four Facades, and the Theater of Variations

By the middle of the second week, there were eleven children. Eleven children were a great number, but the playhouse, which had never been measured in the usual way, accommodated them all without apparent difficulty. Children sat on the cushions along each wall. Children sat on the window seats. Children sat cross-legged on the waxed planks of the floor, leaning against each other the way children lean against each other when they are watching something good.

The architect, from across the street, could not see any of this — because the playhouse was not, strictly speaking, on the pavement — but the architect could feel it the way one feels a draft from a window one has not realized was open. The architect was sleeping better, for one thing. The architect was drawing faster. The architect was laughing, once or twice a day, at things that had not previously been funny. Something in the world had shifted slightly in the direction of joy, and the architect did not yet know why, though the architect suspected.

What the children had discovered about the playhouse, by the eleven-child mark, was the nature of its façades. The four façades looked, at first, identical. Each was pierced with the same kind of arched windows. Each had the same proportions. Each was painted a single unvarying color — orange, blue, yellow, pink. From a hundred yards away, the façades read as a single type of wall repeated four times, the way the four walls of a lunchbox read as a single type of wall repeated four times. This was the façades' first impression, and it was misleading.

The façades' second impression, which you got only after standing among them for a while, was that each one was slightly different. Not in ways that shouted. In ways that murmured. The arched windows on the

orange façade, for example, sat a little lower than the arched windows on the blue façade. The pink façade had a peaked element near the top that the others did not have, a kind of small pointed gable where the roofline wanted to surprise itself. The yellow façade had a long horizontal window above the others, like a raised eyebrow. Each wall was a variation on a theme. Each wall was theatrical. Each wall was practicing, in its own quiet way, the discipline of not being quite like the others.

The discipline of not being quite like the others is, the children gradually came to feel, the whole point of the playhouse. Adults sometimes like to think that good design means every wall looks the same, because if every wall looks the same then the building is tidy and the building is cheap and the building is efficient. The playhouse disagreed. The playhouse believed that if you built four walls all exactly alike, each wall would be lonelier than it needed to be, and the children inside would not have as much to look at, and the building would be teaching a boring lesson about the nature of things. The playhouse, instead, taught a different lesson. The lesson was: repetition is good, but variation is better, and the two of them together are best, because together they are how a piece of music works, and a building ought to work the way a piece of music works. This was a big lesson for a small house to teach. But the playhouse was not shy.

The children, for their part, learned this lesson without being told. They learned it the way children learn the rules of a game by playing the game. They sat at the orange windows and said, "Oh, the orange ones are the lowest." They moved to the yellow windows and said, "The yellow ones are the tallest." They went around and around, noticing, until they had absorbed, deep into their small architectural bones, the rule of the house, which was: same, but different. Same, but different. That was how architecture ought to work. If a lesson is learned early, it will not fade with time.

The other thing the children noticed, at about the eleven-child mark, was that the productions the playhouse was running were open to everybody. The children did not use the word "production," but they understood that each set of windows was, in effect, putting on a show. The orange windows were putting on the MISFITS show. The blue windows were putting on the DINGBATS show. And so on. Four shows. Four theaters. One building. The playhouse did not check tickets. The playhouse did not care what age you were, or what your name was, or what language you spoke, or what color your skin was, or what gender you had been assigned or chosen. If you were willing to press your face to the glass, the show was yours.

This, too, the children took in without being told. They arrived at the playhouse from many neighborhoods — from the Upper West Side and from Spanish Harlem and from the East Village and from Brighton Beach (a long walk for a small child) and from Washington Heights — and they sat among each other on the cushions and did not, at least not inside the playhouse, fall into the small categorizations that the world on the other side of the windows was apt to insist on. A child from Washington Heights and a child from the Upper East Side sat on the same cushion, and their shoulders touched, and neither remembered any reason they should not be touching. The playhouse was a democracy of sightseers. The playhouse was a room in which the rules of the city paused, for as long as you were in the room, and let you see the city as it could yet become.

This was the theater of the playhouse, and the theater was playing every day, four shows at once, with no intermission.

Today, however — the day the eleventh child arrived — something new happened. The eleventh child, who was a boy named Mateo, arrived on the shoulders of his older sister, because he was quite small and the pavement was slippery and the older sister had been enlisted to carry him so that he could see. Mateo, from his perch on his sister's shoulders, arrived at the playhouse and slid down onto the waxed planks and walked straight to the blue windows, because the blue windows were his favorite color, and pressed his little face to the glass, and said:

"Hello, dingbats!"

The other children looked at each other. No one had, until that moment, named the creatures out loud. The creatures had been, up till then, a wordless wonder. Now Mateo had opened the conversation. A name, the children understood, was a door. Once you had named a creature, you could say hello to it, and if you said hello to it enough times, the creature might say hello back.

"Hello, dingbats," Mateo said again, this time louder.

From the other side of the blue wall, through some physics that the playhouse did not see fit to explain, a tiny sound came back. It was a high, cheerful, fluttering sound, as of a thousand tiny bells. The sound said, unmistakably, hello, Mateo.

Mateo turned around and faced the other children and beamed. The beam was the kind of beam that tells every adult present — if any adults had been present, which they were not — that something very important has just occurred. The children crowded around him and put their faces to the blue windows in a row, and on the other side of the blue wall, the dingbats answered them, one by one.

The playhouse, the children now understood, was a conversation. You did not just look out of it. The city looked back. And the city, if you were willing to speak, was willing to reply.

That, said the playhouse quietly to itself, pleased in the way that buildings are sometimes pleased, is how it should always have been.

And across the street, in the apartment on Central Park South, the architect put down a pencil and went and stood at the window and listened, for a long time, to a sound the architect could not quite hear but could almost hear, which was the sound of the city beginning, very slowly, to come back to itself.

The MISFITS are the first generation of architectural follies designed during the pandemic.
Hugging the ground plane closely, they create a series of modern day primitive huts.
The MISFITS surface patterns become a garden and reflect the artificial landscape in which they have settled.
A series of floating aviaries also provide shelter and act as temporary weigh stations for pixies.
Level 3
MISFITS

Plate IV

Chapter Four

The Misfits, and the First Garden of the Follies

The orange windows were the most popular. This did not make the children who preferred the other windows wrong, exactly, but it did make them a minority, and every minority, especially among children, is a little proud of being what it is. The blue-window children (led now by Mateo) were quietly smug about being the ones who had started the hello. The yellow-window children claimed, with some justice, that their view was the prettiest. The pink-window children did not argue; they simply smiled in the knowing way that a child smiles when she has seen something the others have not. But the orange windows, for reasons everyone understood even if nobody said them aloud, were where most of the children gathered most of the time.

The reason was the MISFITS.

The MISFITS, the children had learned by watching them, were the first of the untamed architectural characters to have come into being. They had appeared during the long quiet of the pandemic itself, when the city was emptying, when the sidewalks were wearing the surprise of having nobody on them. The MISFITS had arrived, you could say, the way wildflowers arrive in a neglected lot. Nobody had planted them. Nobody had asked them to come. They had shown up because the space was available, and because somebody, somewhere — the architect, probably, though the children did not need to know the architect existed — had been willing to imagine them.

Looking out the orange windows, you saw the MISFITS in their home territory, which was a kind of garden, down south at the tip of the island where the old buildings of Lower Manhattan crowded up against the water. The MISFITS hugged the ground. They were low. They were not shy about being low. They had the sturdy, close-to-the-earth posture of certain folk architectures — the thatched huts of villages the children had seen in

picture books, the mud huts of the savannah, the stone rondavels of rural places nobody in this particular playhouse had ever been to but which, somehow, the MISFITS resembled. They were modern primitive huts, the architect called them in the private language of the architect's own notes, and what the word modern was doing in the same phrase as primitive was part of the joke, and part of the argument, and part of the whole tone of the project.

Each MISFIT, seen up close through the orange windows, turned out to be wearing a costume of patterned fabric stretched across its volume. The patterns were florid. They were the patterns of things that have nothing to do with buildings: of pillowcases from somebody's grandmother's spare bedroom, of saris folded in a closet, of the cushions on a sofa in a living room that hasn't been redecorated since the 1970s, of the paisley on a tie your father wore to weddings. The MISFITS wore these patterns without embarrassment. They understood that a pattern was a kind of song a surface sings to itself, and they did not see why buildings should be the only objects in the world forbidden to sing.

In and among the MISFITS, floating at the level of the children's eyeline, there were little floating things that were not quite buildings and not quite birdcages. These were the aviaries. The aviaries were, according to what the children had pieced together by patient observation, temporary weigh stations for pixies. Pixies, you see, got tired. A pixie could fly a long way, carrying wishes, carrying translations, carrying small messages between the tribes, but a pixie needed to stop. When a pixie needed to stop, the pixie came to an aviary. The aviary was a little hammock of wire and fabric, gently swaying in the air, and inside it a pixie could sit and have something to eat and take the weight off its wings.

The children did not, at first, understand that only they could see the pixies. They thought the pixies were obvious. The pixies were right there, plain as day, hopping around between the aviaries, chattering at each other, pausing sometimes to hover at an orange window and peer in at the children with the curious, skeptical look that pixies give to anything new. It was only when a child mentioned a pixie out loud to a grown-up — one of the aunts, one afternoon — and the grown-up had said, quite sincerely, "What pixie, sweetheart?" that the children had understood.

Grown-ups could not see the pixies. Grown-ups could only see the buildings, and even the buildings grown-ups could only partly see. Grown-ups, as a general category, had been taught to filter out everything that was not on the list of things approved to be seen. The list was long. The list included: cars, traffic lights, the prices of coffee in coffee shops, the edge of the curb, other people's shoes, the approximate weather, whether it was rush hour. The list did not include: pixies, cheerful tumors of ornament on the sides of buildings, floating aviaries, or any of the untamed architectural characters. Grown-ups were simply not tuned to that frequency, the way a particular radio may not be tuned to a particular station. The station was always broadcasting. The grown-ups could not hear it.

The children, having figured this out, had made a pact. The pact was: we will not tell them. We will not try to convince them. We will let them find it themselves, if they ever do. And in the meantime, we will sit at the orange windows and watch the pixies.

So the children watched the pixies.

One afternoon, a little pixie detached itself from the swarm and flew very close to the orange window where Asha happened to be sitting. The pixie, up close, was smaller than the children had expected — no bigger than a humming-moth — and it was the color of yellow lamplight, and it had a face that was more a suggestion of a face than an actual face, and yet it was unmistakably the face of someone who was paying attention to her.

The pixie hovered at the glass and said — without speaking — a thing Asha could understand.

The thing the pixie said was: Can I come in?

Asha, who had been taught, as discussed, not to go into strange houses and not to let strange people in, and who had also, as discussed, decided that the playhouse was outside the jurisdiction of the ordinary rules, said:

"Yes."

The pixie came in. It did not come in through the glass. It came in through a narrow slot between two panes that had not, a moment earlier, been a slot and that now was. Pixies are good at this. A pixie can find, in a wall, a way through, the way water finds the way through a sponge.

Inside the playhouse, the pixie made a slow, tidy circle around the crown moulding, pausing to inspect the lintel over the pink door, pausing again to peer at a cushion, and finally coming to rest, gently, on Asha's outstretched hand.

"Hello," Asha said. It was the second great hello of the project. The first had been Mateo's hello to the dingbats. This was hello between a child and a pixie, which is a different, smaller, more intimate kind of hello, and which is how most of the real work of the city's recovery actually gets done.

The pixie, from Asha's palm, beamed. (Pixies beam the way children beam.) The pixie, still not speaking out loud, gave Asha a small, wordless gift. The gift was a kind of permission. It was the permission to keep seeing what she was seeing. It was the permission to trust her own eyes. Children, even small ones, sometimes lose this permission in the long schooling ahead of them. The pixie was telling Asha, in the only way a pixie can tell a child anything, to please hold on to it.

Asha nodded. She did not cry, because she was a practical child, but she would have, if she had been any less practical, because the gift felt important.

The pixie lifted off her palm. It made a final tidy circle around the inside of the playhouse. It slipped back out through the slot that was no longer a slot. And on the other side of the orange windows, its swarm received it with a small burst of pixie-chatter, and the MISFITS, low to the ground in their many patterned costumes, went on about their quiet, garden-dwelling, pattern-singing business, which was the first business of the recovery and the seed of everything to come.

The MISFITS slowly migrate beyond the boundaries of the garden in search of permanent sites within the city.
In doing so, they highlight the extreme monochromatic state of architecture within the metropolis.
The colorful and playful architecture of the MISFITS are a symbol to all the citizens that buildings should directly reflect the diversity of its inhabitants.
Level 2
MISFITS

Plate V

Chapter Five

The Misfits Migrate, and the Color Returns

A garden, no matter how full of wonder, is a garden. And wonder, no matter how patient, needs to travel.

By the third week, the children began to notice that the MISFITS were no longer staying in their little low gardens at the tip of Manhattan. The orange windows were beginning to show a different view — still orange-backed, still populated by the same florid, patterned, many-costumed creatures, but the creatures were no longer hugging the ground. They were lifting up on pale thin legs, like storks, and stepping, very slowly and very deliberately, into the streets of the city.

The MISFITS were migrating.

One afternoon, Asha pressed her face to an orange window and saw a MISFIT that had planted itself squarely in the middle of a block of Tribeca she knew — a block that ordinarily contained a row of cast-iron lofts from the nineteenth century, with that particular silvery-grey color that Tribeca lofts take on when the afternoon sun is hitting them from the south. The MISFIT had positioned itself between two of these lofts, and was standing on its thin legs, and was wearing, that afternoon, a pattern of enormous red poppies on a cream background, scaled so large that each poppy was the size of a child. The red poppies against the silver-grey Tribeca street were like a chord struck on a piano that had been, until that moment, playing only single notes.

Asha understood, looking at this, something she did not have the words for but which the architect, later, working in notes at the desk, would try to articulate. The MISFITS were not coming into the city as conquerors. They were coming in as correctives. The city, before the MISFITS began their migration, had been almost entirely monochromatic. Grey upon grey upon grey. Stone and glass and stone and glass. A brown brick here

and a cream terracotta there, but those were exceptions. The default palette of the metropolis, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, was the palette of a photograph taken in fog. The MISFITS, in their migration, were reintroducing color. They were not destroying what was already there. They were augmenting it. They were standing beside the old grey buildings like friends at a party, dressed in the colors the old grey buildings had forgotten they were allowed to wear.

This was, the architect understood, an argument of enormous consequence. The argument was this: that the colorlessness of the modern city was not a neutral fact. It was a choice. It was a choice that had been made, over a very long time, by people who had been trained to believe that color was childish, that pattern was decadent, that ornament was criminal. The city had listened to these people. The city had taken off its patterns and put away its colors and dressed itself in a permanent mourning. The MISFITS were saying: the mourning has gone on long enough. Put on the poppies. Put on the paisleys. Let the old buildings breathe.

And the old buildings, to everybody's surprise, were breathing.

You could see it through the orange windows. You could see a nineteenth-century loft in Tribeca that, the day before, had been silver-grey and forgotten; and you could see, next to it, a MISFIT in a red-poppy dress; and you could see, on the silver-grey loft itself, a tiny change. The sun was catching a cornice the way the sun had not caught the cornice for a century. A window that had been invisible was suddenly visible. The loft had, in some sense that can be felt but is hard to describe, cheered up. It had remembered, with the help of its new MISFIT neighbor, that it was a beautiful building, and had always been, and had only forgotten.

This was the MISFITS' essential work. They did not replace the old city. They reminded the old city of itself.

The children, watching this migration through the orange windows, took great delight in spotting the MISFITS in unlikely places. Mateo, who had by now developed a connoisseur's eye for the blue creatures, nevertheless liked to run over to the orange windows and report his findings. "There's one on Varick Street! There's one on Spring! There's one on Prince — no, on Mercer!" The children kept a list. The list, scratched onto the inside of the yellow façade with a pencil one child had brought in a pocket, grew by the day. It was the first census of untamed architectural characters ever taken, and it was taken, as most good censuses are, by children.

The MISFITS, one should also say, had a particular personality. They were not showy. They were patient. They did not move quickly. They took all day to walk a block, sometimes, and in the meantime they would stand very still and let the people on the sidewalks, if those people were willing to see them, look them over. The people on the sidewalks, for the most part, did not see them. But a few did. The few who did see were, without exception, the people who were not in a hurry. A grandfather on a bench. A homeless man sitting quietly against a wall. A woman in a hijab waiting for a bus. A boy on a skateboard who had stopped to tie his

shoe. These were the adult allies of the MISFITS. These were the grown-ups who had somehow, by accident or by grace, retained the ability to see what children could see.

The architect, standing at the apartment window on Central Park South, belonged — barely — to this alliance. The architect had worked hard, in the last few weeks, to earn it back. The architect had done so mostly by slowing down: by drinking morning tea at a pace that would have been unthinkable a year before, by walking the six blocks to the grocery store without listening to a podcast, by sitting, sometimes, for twenty minutes, on the edge of the desk, not doing anything, simply looking out. This unaccustomed slowness had — as the pixies would have been happy to tell the architect, if the pixies could have spoken at adult frequencies — re-opened certain channels of seeing that ordinary adult busyness had over years walled shut.

Now, from the apartment window, the architect could almost see what the children could see. Not the pixies themselves — the pixies were still out of range — but the MISFITS, yes. If the architect let their eyes go soft, the way you let your eyes go soft to see a magic-eye picture, a MISFIT in poppies would momentarily appear on Varick Street, standing patiently next to a loft, and then, when the architect blinked, be gone.

The MISFITS were migrating, and this migration had consequences. The first consequence was that the designers of the city — the architects, the planners, the preservationists, the people whose job it was to care about what the city looked like — began, very slowly, to take notice. Not the MISFITS themselves (the MISFITS remained invisible to most grown-ups) but the feeling of the MISFITS. A feeling had begun to circulate, in certain corners of the profession, that the monochromatic city was overdue for some kind of correction. People began to say, at dinner parties, things like "I've been thinking about color again." People began to sketch, for the first time in years, buildings that were not silver-grey. There was, you could say, a pressure, like the pressure before a storm, only this pressure was not the pressure of a storm. It was the pressure of a flowering.

The children, who of course saw the flowering clearly, watched its beginning with great satisfaction. They did not know the grown-ups had begun to sketch. They did not need to know. The sketches were the grown-ups' own slow way of catching up. The children understood that grown-ups, when they finally caught up to something, would insist on having thought of it themselves, and that was all right. That was, in fact, how grown-ups worked. Let them have their dignity. The children would let the MISFITS do the teaching, and the grown-ups would eventually, if the children were patient, learn what they were supposed to learn.

Which was, to put it plainly: that the buildings of a city should look like the people in the city. If the people were many and various and brilliant and differently dressed, then the buildings should be many and various and brilliant and differently dressed. A city whose buildings all looked the same was not a neutral city. It was a city that had forgotten, in some profound way, what it was for. And what it was for, the MISFITS were gently and stubbornly proving, was to be beautiful in many directions at once, and to permit the beauty of its people to be reflected, in all their differences, in the beauty of the walls they walked past.

This was, as the architect would later write in notes that nobody else would read, the MISFITS' great gift. The MISFITS had come into the city bringing the news that the city's next job was not to be efficient. The city's next job was to be itself, at last, after a long period of being someone else.

And the children, at the orange windows, watching the poppies in Tribeca, nodded, the way children nod when an important thing has been said out loud. They knew. They had always known. That was why they had gathered at the orange windows in the first place.

The urbanism of MISFITS is unruly and random.
This unpredictability produces an appeal that attracts designers near and far.
As designers study the MISFITS architectural behaviors, it becomes clear they are a tribe with an unbreakable code.
The pixies offer their assistance and translate the code.
Its meaning is simple, yet powerful.
The MISFITS speak the vernacular of compassion for individuals per freedom of expression.
Level 1
MISFITS

Plate VI

Chapter Six

The Misfits Speak the Vernacular of Compassion

There comes a moment, in any good book about a new thing, when somebody has to translate. Somebody has to stand up and say: here is what this new thing means. This moment is tricky. If the translator is too loud, the new thing loses its strangeness, its mystery, the hush it carried before anyone explained it. If the translator is too quiet, the new thing never makes it past its original small circle, and dies there. The right translator is patient and precise. The right translator is humble about what can be translated and honest about what cannot. The right translator, most importantly, has actually spent the time to learn the thing's language before presuming to speak for it.

In the story of the MISFITS, the right translators were the pixies.

We have met the pixies already, floating in and out of their aviaries, ferrying wishes between the tribes and the inhabitants of the city. We have met Asha's first pixie, which sat on her palm and gave her the wordless gift of permission to keep seeing. Now the pixies had a more public job to do. Word had been getting around, in the design community — very quietly, through sketches made at kitchen tables and photographs shared in late-night text messages — that a new kind of architecture had appeared on the island of Manhattan. People were beginning to want to understand it. People were beginning to want to understand it so that they could make more of it, or copy it, or analyze it in academic journals, or — here it is worth being honest — sell it. The MISFITS, in becoming visible to a handful of grown-ups, had entered the zone of potential misunderstanding. The MISFITS needed their translators.

The pixies were ready.

They did the translating in the only way pixies can do anything, which was at pixie scale. A pixie would find a designer — usually one of the slow ones, the ones who took breaks, the ones who did not check email on weekends — and would hover, invisibly, near that designer's ear for a few weeks. The designer would not hear anything exactly. The designer would, instead, find themselves thinking certain thoughts they had not been in the habit of thinking. Thoughts like: perhaps the grid is not the only way. Thoughts like: perhaps efficiency has been oversold. Thoughts like: perhaps I have been mistaken about what my job is. These thoughts did not announce themselves as pixie-delivered. They arrived the way good thoughts do, looking like the designer's own. The designer accepted them gratefully and took credit for them. The pixies did not mind. The pixies were above ego.

Over the course of several months, in this gentle, invisible, credit-distributing way, the pixies managed to translate the central lesson of the MISFITS into a form that a significant number of grown-up designers could understand. The lesson, boiled down, was this:

The MISFITS speak the vernacular of compassion for individuals per freedom of expression.

This was a sentence the architect herself had written in a notebook one evening, long before the pixies got involved. The sentence had come to the architect the way such sentences sometimes come — fully formed, a little larger than the page could contain, requiring to be underlined twice. The sentence was, the architect had sensed, the heart of the whole project, though the architect was not sure, at the time of writing, what to do with it.

What the pixies did with it was this: they distributed it. They took that one sentence, word for word, and laid it gently into the minds of designers all across the city. Not as a quotation. As a feeling. A feeling, if you translated it back into words, that meant: buildings should make room for the particular human beings who pass them. That the shape of a wall should be, in some small way, a kindness. That ornament was not decoration; ornament was evidence that the designer had thought about the viewer. That an individual person's freedom to be themselves — to wear the clothes they wanted to wear, to love the people they loved, to name themselves by the names that fit — deserved to be mirrored in the walls that surrounded that person. A city of uniform walls was a city that did not quite believe in the individuality of its citizens. A city of MISFITS-style walls was a city that did.

This was, the architect was aware, a large claim to pin on a band of patterned follies standing in the gardens of Lower Manhattan. But the architect was also aware that large claims sometimes need small vehicles. Children, if told this claim directly, would have nodded politely and gone back to their games. The claim would have bounced off them like rain off a tent. But children, shown a MISFIT in red poppies standing next to a silver-grey Tribeca loft, were quite capable of taking the claim in without ever having to have it explained. Adults were harder. Adults needed the pixies.

And the pixies, month by month, were doing the work.

Asha, during this period, was not aware of the grown-up translation project. She was seven years old and she was, most afternoons, in the playhouse, looking at the orange windows, which had by now begun to show her yet another level of the MISFITS' life. This new level, which the architect had also been modeling in Rhino 3D — and which the children had begun to call, in their own language, the ground level, because it was where the MISFITS had their feet planted — showed the MISFITS in the full density of their urban presence. Where before there had been a few MISFITS scattered in a garden, now there were MISFITS everywhere. The streets Asha had known were the silver-grey streets of ordinary Manhattan. The streets through the orange windows were those same streets, but augmented. Every corner had a MISFIT standing on it, chatting (in the low, patient way MISFITS chat, which is almost imperceptible to anyone but a pixie) with the old buildings around it. The old buildings, flattered by the attention, were standing up a little straighter. The old buildings were, you might say, dressing better. A brownstone that the day before had looked as if it had been asleep for forty years was now looking as if it had washed its face and put on a clean shirt. The brownstone had not changed. It was only the company it kept. A building in the company of a MISFIT began, by contagion, to feel beautiful again.

Asha put her nose against the orange window and traced the route she would take, if she could walk into the picture, from the playhouse to her own brownstone. She could see, at each corner of the route, a MISFIT. She could see the MISFITS standing watch along her street. She could see them, if she let her imagination work, standing watch along every street any of the eleven children in the playhouse lived on. The MISFITS, she understood, had distributed themselves across the city the way affection distributes itself across a family. Not equally; some places had more; some had fewer; but everywhere there was at least one, and no corner was entirely without.

Mateo, at the blue window, called out: "Asha, come here!" And Asha ran to the blue window, which was his window, and what she saw there she could describe for months afterward.

A MISFIT had gone over to the blue side.

It had somehow, in its patient way, strayed from the orange territory and made its way — the children could not tell how, because the orange and blue territories were, in the city outside, quite far apart — into the block of a brownstone to which a few DINGBATS had already attached themselves. The MISFIT and the DINGBATS were, as Asha and Mateo watched, in the process of introducing themselves. The MISFIT, wearing a tremendous embroidered dress of pomegranates on a deep green ground, had bent its head slightly to the nearest DINGBAT, which was a small, shy, scale-patterned little thing clinging to the side of the brownstone. The DINGBAT, in response, had extended — there is no other word for it — a small architectural handshake. It was not a literal hand. Architecture does not have hands. But the two of them had touched, in a way that was unmistakably a handshake, the way two strangers touch when they have decided to be friends.

"They can be friends," Mateo said, with the solemnity of a seven-year-old making a pronouncement. Mateo was six, actually, but he carried himself like a seven-year-old.

"They can be friends," Asha agreed.

The children looked at each other. This was an important thing they had just seen. The four tribes, until this moment, had each stayed in their own lanes. The MISFITS down south. The DINGBATS in the middle. The BLOWUPS in the park. The DOODADS — those rare and precious things — uptown. The lanes had been, in a loose way, respected. Now the lanes were being crossed. A MISFIT had walked over the line and shaken hands with a DINGBAT, and nothing bad had happened. In fact, something good had happened. The handshake had, somehow, made both of them more themselves. The MISFIT looked more MISFITty than ever. The DINGBAT, encouraged by the attention, had puffed itself up a little, the way a small child puffs itself up when a beloved older cousin has deigned to acknowledge it. The two of them were, in the handshake, being introduced to each other as versions of the same project: the project of the untamed architectural characters, the project of the city rediscovering itself.

This was important, the children felt, and they watched it carefully. They did not have the vocabulary, yet, to explain what they were watching. But they knew — in the way children know everything — that the handshake between a MISFIT and a DINGBAT was the beginning of something bigger than either of them. The tribes, from here on, would not only live in their lanes. They would visit each other. They would, in time, produce hybrids — offspring who were half one thing and half another, who showed the features of both tribes, who carried the lessons of both tribes at once.

And the pixies, who had been hovering overhead the whole time, took the handshake as a good sign, and spread the word through their thousand-tiny-bells network to every other pixie in the city, and to every designer whose ear they currently inhabited, and to the architect at the apartment on Central Park South, who looked up from the desk at exactly that moment, without knowing why, and said — out loud, to the empty apartment — "Something nice just happened."

Something nice had. The vernacular of compassion had spoken its first complete sentence.

And the cross-pollination of the tribes, which would soon transform the city in ways nobody had expected, had begun.

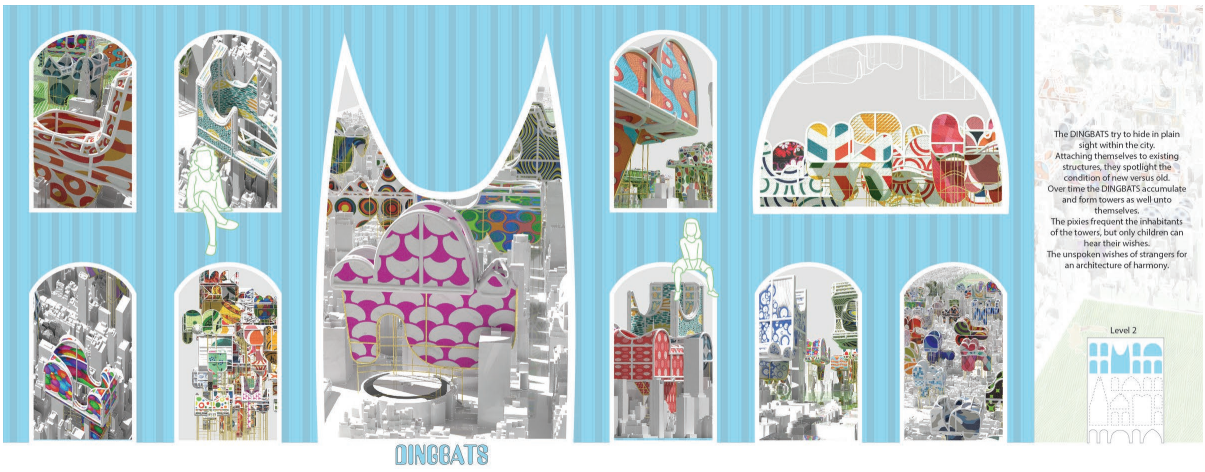

The DINGBATS try to hide in plain sight within the city.
Attaching themselves to existing structures, they spotlight the condition of new versus old.
Over time the DINGBATS accumulate and form towers as well unto themselves.
The pixies frequent the inhabitants of the towers, but only children can hear their wishes.
The unspoken wishes of strangers for an architecture of harmony.
Level 2
DINGBATS

Plate VII

Chapter Seven

The Dingbats Emerge, Hidden in Plain Sight

The DINGBATS were shy. That was the first thing you had to understand about them. If the MISFITS were the extroverts of the tribes — the ones who stood in gardens and wore poppies and did not care who was watching — the DINGBATS were the introverts. The DINGBATS preferred not to be noticed. The DINGBATS preferred, whenever possible, to attach themselves sideways to an existing building and pretend to be part of it, so that the casual passerby would see the existing building and not notice that something new had happened to it.

This is not to say the DINGBATS were invisible. Children noticed them instantly. A child, walking past a brownstone on a perfectly ordinary street in the East Village, would see the DINGBAT at once: a little scale-patterned thing, perhaps a foot and a half long, clinging to a corner of the brownstone's façade about four feet off the ground, with the particular air of a small creature that hopes it has blended in. The DINGBAT was not, in the child's eye, pretending very well. The DINGBAT was obvious. But the DINGBAT was also, the child understood, trying its best. And the child, being a generous judge of such things, decided not to spoil the effort by pointing at the DINGBAT. The child walked past as if the DINGBAT had succeeded. The DINGBAT, in gratitude, did a small pleased wobble, the way a tiny dog wobbles when it has been given a compliment.

From the playhouse, out the blue windows, you could see the DINGBATS in their full distributed glory. They were everywhere. They had attached themselves to brownstones, to tenements, to water towers, to the corners of 1950s apartment buildings, to the back alleys behind 1980s office towers, to the iron railings of old churches. They had arranged themselves in chains — one DINGBAT clinging to a building, and then another DINGBAT clinging to the first DINGBAT, and a third clinging to the second — so that in certain places the

DINGBATS had formed little vertical stacks, like beads on a string, growing up the sides of the old buildings. The old buildings, for their part, did not seem to mind. If anything, the old buildings liked it. A nineteenth-century brownstone with a DINGBAT chain growing up its right flank looked, through the blue windows, as if it had put on a colorful scarf. The brownstone liked the scarf. The brownstone had been told, for many decades, that buildings did not wear scarves, and the brownstone had believed this, and the brownstone had therefore gone scarfless all this time. Now the DINGBATS had, quietly and without asking permission, given the brownstone a scarf. The brownstone was delighted. Delighted buildings are something you can feel if you are paying attention.

Mateo, who had proprietary feelings about the DINGBATS because he had been the first to say hello to them, had developed a sophisticated theory about what the DINGBATS were for. Mateo explained his theory, one afternoon, to a small crowd of the other children, with the gravity of a child explaining how ice cream is made.

"The DINGBATS," Mateo said, "are for the buildings that are sad."

The other children listened.

"Lots of buildings are sad," Mateo continued. "A building gets sad if nobody has looked at it in a long time. It keeps thinking — am I still here? And nobody answers. And so it gets sadder and sadder. And after a while, if nobody answers, the building might just forget that it was there at all, and then it would fall down."

The children nodded. This was making sense to them. Mateo was getting warmed up.

"The DINGBATS," he said, "are like — like helpers. They go to the sad building and they stick themselves onto it, and they say 'we are here, we can see you,' and the building says 'oh good, you can see me,' and then the building is not sad anymore. And then the building stays up."

He concluded: "That is what DINGBATS are for. They are for making sure the buildings do not forget that they exist."

There was a silence while the children processed this, and then the oldest child in the playhouse, a nine-year-old girl named Priya, said:

"Mateo, that is correct."

And it was.

That was, in fact, exactly what the DINGBATS were for. The DINGBATS were the recognition that a building, like a person, needs to be seen. A building that goes a long time unlooked-at begins to decay not because anything material has changed but because something immaterial has withdrawn. The withdrawal can be slow. The withdrawal can take forty years. But eventually the withdrawal becomes visible, in the form of missing bricks, in the form of broken windows, in the form of an irregular slump in the line of the cornice, in

the form of that particular sad quality that certain abandoned buildings have. The DINGBATS were, in effect, a correction to this withdrawal. A DINGBAT attached itself to a building and, by its sheer presence, restored to that building the sense of being noticed. The building's slump lifted. The cornice straightened. The bricks stopped falling out. The building was, in a word, cheered.

This did require — it is important to say — that a sufficient number of children were willing to walk past, from time to time, and silently pretend the DINGBAT had blended in. DINGBATS did not work in isolation. They worked in a quiet conspiracy with the children of the neighborhood, whose generous pretending was the last step in the mechanism. Without the children, the DINGBATS would have had nobody to be shy in front of, and their shyness would have been, as it were, unwitnessed. With the children, the mechanism was complete. The building was seen. The DINGBAT was, in its small way, recognized. Everybody went home happy.

There was, however, a further development. The DINGBATS did not only attach themselves to existing buildings. Over time, they began to accumulate into towers unto themselves. You could see one of these towers through the blue window if you looked carefully — it stood, in the imaginary city through the glass, somewhere in what would have been the Flatiron district — and it was an extraordinary thing. It was not a building in the ordinary sense. It was a stack of DINGBATS, piled on each other's heads, each a little scale-patterned shy creature, all together making something like a skyscraper but without the regularity that a skyscraper usually has. The tower wobbled slightly in the wind. The tower wore different patterns at different levels. The tower was, in its own way, a biography of its own construction — an archeology of the moments at which different DINGBATS had arrived and joined up.

The children called it the Wobble Tower.

The Wobble Tower was home, Asha and Mateo eventually deduced, to a great many of the pixies. The pixies lived in its gaps. A tower made of many small creatures stacked on top of each other has, by definition, a lot of gaps — the little spaces between one DINGBAT's backside and the next DINGBAT's belly — and pixies liked gaps. Pixies liked, in fact, any architecture that had not been smoothed out to eliminate its in-between spaces. Pixies, you could say, were a species of architectural intelligence that specialized in the territory most other architectural intelligences try to eliminate.

In the Wobble Tower, the pixies held what the architect's notes called "wish frequencies." These were times during which a pixie would sit at the gap between two DINGBATS and broadcast, outward into the air of the surrounding neighborhood, a listening frequency. On that frequency, the pixie would hear the unspoken wishes of the strangers passing through the streets below. The man on the way to the pharmacy. The woman unlocking her bicycle. The delivery driver waiting at the light. Each of these strangers, on a given day, was carrying some unspoken wish — for their mother to get better, for their child to pass an exam, for the check to come in, for the roommate to move out, for the war in another country to end, for a friend to call back. The pixies gathered these wishes. The pixies sorted them. The pixies stored the kindest ones in the Wobble Tower,

in a kind of architectural pantry, where they could be looked at later and perhaps, if conditions were right, acted upon.

Only children could hear the pixies hearing. This was an important small fact. The grown-ups, walking past the Wobble Tower (which for them simply appeared as an unassuming intersection where nothing in particular was happening), could not hear anything at all. They could not hear their own wishes being gathered. They could not hear the pixies at the gaps. They could not hear the DINGBATS' soft pleased wobble when a wish of unusual sweetness floated up. The grown-ups, going about their ordinary business, were missing the whole transaction. But the transaction was happening anyway. The unspoken wishes of strangers for an architecture of harmony were being heard, and held, and — in ways nobody was yet in a position to understand — beginning to coalesce into something that would eventually take shape.

That something, although the children did not yet know it, was about to enter the story. It was about to enter the story through the blue windows of the playhouse, but it was large enough and new enough that it could not stay in the blue windows alone. It would, in time, change the shape of what could be seen through all four.

It had a name. The name was DINGBATS Housing. And on the morning it arrived, Asha was at the blue window, and what she saw made her sit down, very slowly, on the cushion behind her, because her legs were suddenly shaking.

The desire for harmony is made concrete through the establishment of DINGBATS Housing.
The DINGBATS Housing displays nested conditions of volumes inside of volumes. These nested volumes of forms represent the unity of multi-generations living and working from home.
As the effects of the pandemic rage on, isolation produces conditions in which DINGBATS Housing grows exponentially. As seasons pass, the pixies intervene and MISFITS are seen emerging from clusters of DINGBATS Housing as a symbol of hope.
Level 1
DINGBATS

Plate VIII

Chapter Eight

Dingbats Housing, and the Unity of Generations

What Asha saw, through the blue window that morning, was a building like none she had ever seen.

It was — the easiest way to explain it is to say what it looked like, and you can decide, later, whether the explanation has done the building justice. It was a cluster. It was several volumes nested inside several other volumes, like those painted wooden dolls from Russia that open to reveal a smaller painted wooden doll inside, which opens to reveal a smaller painted wooden doll inside that, and so on, down to the smallest doll at the very center, which does not open because there is nothing smaller to put inside it. Asha had a set of these dolls at home. She was staring, through the blue window, at a building that had somehow been designed by someone who had also had a set of these dolls.

The outer volume was tall and house-shaped — a long, lean vertical house of a kind Asha had seen in picture books about the Netherlands, with a steep peaked roof and a flagpole at the top. Inside that outer house was another, smaller house, of the same shape but turned a little, so you could see its corners through the outer house's windows. Inside that one, another. Inside that one, another. The whole thing was, you might say, a Russian doll of houses. It was decorated, all over, in the patterns the DINGBATS were by now famous for — scales and arches and soft cream blues and oranges and yellows — but the decorations here were more elaborate, because the building was more ambitious.

Asha sat down, as mentioned, on the cushion behind her. Her legs were shaking a little because she had understood, the moment she saw the building, what it was. It was the grown-up version of the DINGBATS. It was the DINGBATS finally organizing themselves into something large enough to be a real building —

something you could live in, something that had doors and kitchens and bedrooms, something that solved the most boring and most urgent of all architectural problems, which was: where do people sleep.

This was the DINGBATS Housing.

The architect, at the apartment across the street, had been working on the DINGBATS Housing for weeks. The architect had understood, at some point during the long progression from garden MISFITS to migrating MISFITS to shy DINGBATS and Wobble Towers, that the whole project was going to have to confront, sooner or later, the question of ordinary inhabitation. The untamed architectural characters could not only be wild things wandering in gardens. They had to house somebody. A vision of an architectural future that did not address who was going to sleep where, and with whom, and in what circumstances, was a vision that would — rightly — be dismissed by grown-ups as a mere fantasy. The architect was willing to be a fantasist, to an extent, but the architect was not willing to be dismissed.

And so the architect had sat down, several weeks earlier, and had thought hard about what the DINGBATS could do for the problem of housing.

The answer had come, as answers sometimes do, in the middle of the night. The architect had woken up at three a.m., had walked in slippered feet to the kitchen, had drunk a glass of water, and had said, aloud, to the empty kitchen: "Nested volumes." The architect had then gone back to bed and slept for another four hours and woken up and remembered, to the architect's slight surprise, that nested volumes were the answer. The architect had gone to the desk that morning and begun to model a building in Rhino 3D whose basic organizing principle was that each dwelling contained, within it, a smaller dwelling, and that smaller dwelling contained, within it, a smaller dwelling still.

The point of this was that a family — or, more exactly, a family across generations — does not actually live in one room. A family lives in a series of concentric privacies. There is the outermost room, where people come and go — where the front door is, where dinner is eaten, where the grown-ups entertain. Inside that, there is a more private layer — the sitting room where the family reads in the evening, the kitchen where the weekday breakfasts happen, the hallway to the bedrooms. Inside that, there is the bedroom layer, which is more private still. Inside the bedroom, if you are lucky, there is a kind of secret territory — the bedside table, the inside of the wardrobe, the pillow — that belongs to one person alone. A family, in other words, is a system of nested volumes. The outer volume is the most public; the inner volume is the most private. Good housing, the architect had realized, should honor the actual shape of this nesting. It should not flatten a family's life into a single open plan and call it flexibility. It should give each layer its own little room, and let the family move through the layers the way you move through a set of Russian dolls, opening each one in turn.

The DINGBATS Housing did exactly this.

A family could enter through the outermost house, which was the tallest and the most decorated, and which presented a welcoming patterned face to the street. They could hang their coats. They could leave their wet umbrella. They could ring a bell, which, in this house, was not a doorbell in the ordinary sense but a small hanging chime of colored glass. Then they could pass through into the next-inner house, which was a little smaller, a little warmer, a little more their own — the place for cooking and talking and eating. Inside that was a third house, which was the grandparents' house, if the family had grandparents living with them; and inside the third was a fourth, which was the parents'; and inside the fourth was a fifth, which was the children's. Each layer was, architecturally, a complete dwelling in miniature, with its own miniature roof and its own miniature windows. But each layer was also connected, by threshold and sightline and carefully placed stairway, to every other layer. You could see your grandmother reading from the children's house, if you wanted to. You could be alone in the children's house without her seeing, if you wanted that too. The housing gave you both.

This, the architect had come to believe, was the point. The pandemic had taught everybody who had lived through it a hard new lesson about what a house was for. A house, it turned out, was not simply a place one slept and stored one's shoes. A house was the whole place you lived when the world outside the house closed down. It was the place you went to school, the place you worked, the place you exercised, the place you cried, the place you cooked, the place you read, the place you prayed, the place you fought, the place you made up. The pandemic had compressed the world into the house. And the housing most people were living in had not been designed for this compression. Most housing had been designed on the assumption that the house was a loading dock — a place people passed through between other things. When the other things went away, and the house became the whole thing, the house was too small, too flat, too open in the wrong ways and too closed in the wrong ways. Families inside ordinary housing, during the pandemic, had begun to chafe against each other the way stones chafe against each other in a too-small bag.

The DINGBATS Housing was the answer. The DINGBATS Housing was designed from the beginning on the assumption that the house might, at any moment, become the whole world of everyone inside it. It gave them the nested volumes they would need, when that happened, to keep out of each other's way and yet remain together. It was an architecture for multi-generations living and working from home. It was, one might say, pandemic-proof. Not in the sense that it could prevent a pandemic from happening, which no building can do, but in the sense that it would let a family live through one without coming apart.

In the imaginary city visible through the blue windows, there were now dozens of DINGBATS Housing clusters. The architect, in Rhino 3D, kept modeling them. The children, at the blue windows, kept watching new ones appear. And in a further development that the children found especially pleasing, something unexpected had begun to happen: from the oldest of the DINGBATS Housing clusters, small MISFITS were beginning to emerge. They were coming out through the arched windows of the nested houses. They were strolling down the little paved paths between the clusters. They were, in effect, being born from the DINGBATS Housing into the open city. A DINGBAT cluster, given enough time and enough children walking

past to see it, could incubate a MISFIT. The MISFIT would emerge, stretch, look around at its new neighborhood, and set off to find a corner to stand on.

"The DINGBATS are making MISFITS," Mateo said, watching this happen. He was delighted. He felt that his favorite tribe had, in some important way, won — not won in the competitive sense, but won in the generative sense. His tribe was producing new life. His tribe was a kind of parent to the other tribes. This was a fine thing for a tribe to be.

The other children agreed. The children understood that the DINGBATS, by making MISFITS, had shown that the tribes were not separate species but branches of the same tree. A tribe could produce another tribe. A tribe could change, slowly, into another tribe. A tribe could make, out of its own body, a younger cousin, who would carry the tribe's lessons into places the tribe itself had not been able to go.

This was the great news the DINGBATS Housing was delivering, in addition to the news about nested volumes and multi-generational living. The news was: the tribes can turn into each other. The news was: the characters of the city can evolve.

And somewhere overhead, the pixies, hearing this, made a noise like a thousand tiny bells ringing a single long pure tone, because they had been waiting to hear this news for a very long time.

The BLOWUPS visually express a hybrid combination of emperhal and unnatural architectures.
The apparent buoyancy of the BLOWUPS is counterbalanced by tubular ballast.
The tubular ballast is also transformed by necessity for the unnatural landscape acting as topiary rooms the scale of buildings.
The pixies dwell inside the jumbo topiary rooms and welcome all visitors into striated experiential environments.
The elevational viewpoint of the BLOWUPS act out an alphabet for children teaching of changes in the pandemic globally.
Level 3
BLOWUPS

Plate IX

Chapter Nine

The Blowups and the Alphabet of Spring

The yellow window had been, until now, the quietest.

It was not that the yellow children (as they called themselves) were less enthusiastic than the others. It was simply that the things on the far side of the yellow window were, at first, harder to understand. The MISFITS, through the orange window, made immediate narrative sense: they were colorful creatures, they walked into the city, they stood next to old buildings and cheered them up. Children got this instantly. The DINGBATS, through the blue window, also made immediate sense — they hid, they clung, they formed towers, they made housing. Children got that too.

The BLOWUPS, through the yellow window, were strange.

Through the yellow window, the children saw — in the middle of what had to be Central Park, because the green was unmistakable — a series of enormous, buoyant, mushroom-shaped, polka-dotted, candy-striped, topknotted things floating about forty feet above the grass. They did not quite touch the grass. They seemed to want to rise further. They were kept down by tubular green things on the ground below them — hedges, the children eventually decided, but hedges like nothing in any park — hedges that were the size of buildings and that curled into spirals and looped into donuts and ran in stripes across the lawn. The floating things and the hedges on the ground were, together, one system. The floating things wanted to rise; the hedges on the ground held them down. This was — though the children did not have the word — a ballast arrangement.

The floating things, the children eventually came to understand, were called BLOWUPS. The hedges that held them down were called, in the architect's notebooks, tubular ballast — but the children called them, more accurately, the buildings on the ground. Because the hedges were not, in fact, hedges. They were topiary rooms.

The hedges were the size of buildings. The hedges, if you walked into them — and you could walk into them — turned out to contain rooms. Small green corridors, arched green doorways, hollow green halls. The BLOWUPS above, floating pleasantly, held the whole thing in place by their opposite desire.

The children, when they worked this out, were astonished. They had understood, until this moment, that a building was a solid thing that sat on the ground. The BLOWUPS, plus their ballast, were undoing that premise. A building, the BLOWUPS seemed to be saying, did not have to sit on the ground. A building could float above the ground, held down by a second building, which was made of hedges. The two buildings — the floating one and the green one — were, together, the actual architecture. Neither alone was the architecture. The architecture was the tension between them.

This was, for a child of seven, a challenging idea. It took several afternoons of careful looking before the children were sure they were seeing what they thought they were seeing. The architect, over at the apartment, was meanwhile modeling the BLOWUPS in Rhino 3D with particular care, because the BLOWUPS were, in their way, the trickiest of the tribes. The BLOWUPS required a person to understand that architecture could be buoyant — literally buoyant, like balloons — and that the opposite of buoyancy was not weight but groundedness. A BLOWUP needed a groundedness partner. A BLOWUP without its tubular ballast would simply float away. A tubular ballast without its BLOWUP would be a merely horticultural oddity, an overgrown shrub. The two needed each other. Neither was the whole building. This was a lesson about partnership as structure, and the architect suspected — correctly — that it was going to take the children a few days to absorb it.

While they absorbed it, the pixies made themselves at home in the topiary rooms. The topiary rooms were, pixies agreed, the most comfortable places in the entire city of untamed characters. The green walls were gentle. The light coming in through the spaces between the hedge-leaves was dappled. The air inside had the particular smell of a greenhouse — a little damp, a little sweet, the smell of things growing. A pixie could spend a whole afternoon in a topiary room and not run out of agreeable corners to explore.

The pixies, in their enthusiasm, had opened the topiary rooms up to visitors. You could enter a topiary room, if you were a child, and you could spend as long as you wanted wandering through its green corridors. Mateo, Asha, Priya, and the others took turns. A child would go in through the yellow window — which in this matter functioned like a door, because the playhouse was imaginary and the imaginary did not care about the usual distinction between window and door — and would spend twenty minutes in a BLOWUP topiary room, and would come back wide-eyed and pleased and full of stories. The stories had a particular quality. They were not exactly stories about what the child had done in the topiary room. They were stories about what the child had learned.

What the child had learned was always, in some way, a letter.

The architect, in modeling the BLOWUPS, had given them a particular feature that the children had taken several days to notice. The BLOWUPS, seen from the front — from the angle that an elevational drawing shows — spelled out letters. They were architectural letters. The first BLOWUP was an A. The second, elsewhere in the park, was a B. There was a C and a D and an E, across the park, each with its particular costume. The architect had designed the whole tribe as an alphabet. An alphabet for children — an alphabet that taught, in addition to the letters, something about how the pandemic had changed the world. Each letter stood for a change. A was for Apart, which was how everyone had had to be for a while. B was for Breath, which was what you had to be careful with. C was for Care, which was what all the grown-ups had suddenly had to take of each other, and still had to. D was for Distance. E was for Everyone, which was the big lesson — that the pandemic had been everyone's at once.

The children, learning these letters inside the topiary rooms, did not feel that they were being taught. They felt that they were playing. The letters were incidental, the way vocabulary is incidental in a game. But the letters lodged. The letters went into the children's memories in a way that schoolroom letters did not always do. Priya, the nine-year-old, said at one point that the Alphabet of the BLOWUPS was going to stay with her longer than her actual alphabet had. The others nodded. They felt the same.

This was, the pixies quietly said to each other, the whole point. Lessons learned through the body — through an afternoon of wandering inside a giant green A-shaped hedge — stayed with a child in a way that lessons learned at a desk sometimes did not. The BLOWUPS were, under their playful exterior, a pedagogical scheme. They were teaching the children to carry, for the rest of their lives, the story of what had happened to the world. Not the traumatic story. The thoughtful story. The story in which Apart and Breath and Care and Distance and Everyone had, together, been the conditions under which the world had had to remake itself.

Priya, one afternoon, asked the pixie who was sitting on her shoulder — she had her own pixie by now; most of the older children did — what the last letter of the alphabet was for.

The pixie, who did not speak but communicated in the usual wordless way, said: Z is for Zenith.

Priya was puzzled. "Zenith?"

The pixie said: The highest point. The top of the sky. The place above the park where the BLOWUPS go when they are ready.

Priya was quiet for a while. Then she said: "Ready for what?"

The pixie said: Ready for spring.

Priya went back inside the playhouse and found the other children. She gathered them near the yellow window. She told them what the pixie had said. The children looked out at the BLOWUPS together. The BLOWUPS, that afternoon, seemed to the children to be a little more buoyant than usual — straining a little

harder against their tubular ballast, a little higher in the air than they had been the day before. A small, specific, nonverbal message passed through the children: something was going to happen. The BLOWUPS were preparing. They were getting ready to do whatever it was that BLOWUPS did when they were ready.

And what, it turned out, they were ready to do was this: to signal the arrival of spring.

The architect, across the street, had been working on this particular piece of the story with great care. The architect had not yet shown the children what was going to happen, because the architect wanted the children to see it in its proper time, from the proper window. But the architect had planned it down to the detail. The BLOWUPS were not merely decorative, not merely pedagogical, not merely buoyant. The BLOWUPS had a functional role in the city. Inside their tubular ballast, they stored rainwater. They were enormous rain-collecting vessels. Over the course of the winter, they had been filling up. And when the right day came — when a certain angle of sun, a certain warmth of air, a certain chorus of early birds all coincided — the BLOWUPS would release the water they had been holding, would irrigate the park beneath them, would make the park bloom on a day when, without their help, the park would still have been dormant.

The pandemic winter had been long. The ordinary signs of the city's recovery had been slow. The BLOWUPS, in their buoyant patient way, were preparing to perform the most practical of their services: to make the park visibly spring, on the right day, so that the city's inhabitants — children and adults alike — would be reassured that the world was continuing. That life was continuing. That the winter had ended. That the park was, as it had always eventually done, coming back.

Priya, sensing this, said to the other children — with the solemnity of the oldest child among them — "I think the most important day is coming."

The children agreed. The children gathered closer to the yellow window. And the pixies, hearing this, raced out across the city to tell every other pixie, and every MISFIT, and every DINGBAT, and every DOODAD still dormant under the winter earth, that the day was near.

Oblique projections of the BLOWUPS divulge the interior courtyards for public gatherings.
The courtyards double as educational classrooms for all citizens.
The perimeter of the BLOWUPS courtyards allow for panoramic viewing platforms for children to survey the silent city in a predicament.
The pixies scripture preach of a dormant city that later blossoms into a bountiful spring.
The BLOWUPS storage of rainwater ballast will irrigate the city's park to signal the arrival of the long awaited season.
Level 2
BLOWUPS

Plate X

Chapter Ten

Classrooms Under Glass, a Silent City in Waiting

There was a phrase the pixies had taken to using, through this long late winter, that troubled the children when they heard it. The phrase was: the silent city in a predicament.

"Predicament" is a big word for a small child. It has a complicated sound, like a foreign word that has come to visit and refuses to go home. The pixies, however, were fond of it. They said it often. They said it in the way one says the name of a house that has grown ill. The silent city, in the pixies' telling, was the city as the pandemic had left it — emptier than it ought to have been, quieter than it ought to have been, less itself than it ought to have been. The predicament was the condition the city was in. A predicament is a situation you have not chosen and cannot easily leave, a stuck place, a place that requires waiting and care.

The children, overhearing the pixies use this phrase, began to use it themselves. "The silent city in a predicament," Asha would say, looking out through the yellow window at the BLOWUPS' topiary rooms in the park, which were visible as if from above, as if she were a bird — this being another of the tricks the playhouse played — "is going to come out of its predicament. Right?"

The pixies always said yes. The pixies were firm about this. The pixies had been briefed, by the architect, on the importance of saying yes.

To help the children understand, the pixies had arranged a very particular experience. At the outer edge of each BLOWUP's courtyard — because the BLOWUPS had courtyards, as well as the alphabet-shaped topiary rooms — there ran a raised perimeter. The perimeter was a kind of balcony. It was narrow enough that you had to walk single-file. It was railed with thin golden metalwork. And from that perimeter, a child could look

out over the surrounding city in a full three hundred and sixty degrees. This was the panoramic viewing platform. It was, the pixies said, a platform from which to survey the silent city.

Asha, Mateo, Priya, and the other children took turns standing on the perimeter of the BLOWUPS' courtyards. The experience was unlike anything they had had before. From up there, the city spread out below them in miniature. They could see, if they looked south, the streets of Tribeca in which the MISFITS stood. They could see, if they looked east and west, the avenues in which the DINGBATS clung to their brownstones and the Wobble Towers wobbled. They could see, if they looked north, a darker territory in which the DOODADS were rumored to be waiting, though the DOODADS themselves had not yet appeared. And they could see, all around, the great gray masses of the ordinary city — the towers of midtown, the low roofs of the Village, the bridges reaching across to Brooklyn and Queens — and they could see, more importantly, that the ordinary city was very, very quiet.

This was the silent city in a predicament. The children could see it. They could see that very few people were on the streets. They could see that many shops were closed. They could see that in certain blocks the windows of the apartment buildings glowed, while in certain other blocks most windows were dark. They could see, with a clarity that nobody had explained but that the platform allowed, the shape of the pandemic's effect on the city — which blocks had emptied out, which had filled up with those who could not leave, which had become harder places to live, which had become, briefly, easier.

The sight was sobering. The children, looking at it, were not sad — they were too young to be sad in the adult sense — but they were serious. They stood on the golden perimeters of the courtyards, one at a time, each child taking their turn, and they looked at what the pandemic had done, and they let the looking sink in.

This was, the pixies agreed, important. A child who lived through an era of serious events ought to be given, at some point, the chance to see those events. Not dramatized. Not softened. Just seen. A child was more resilient than adults tended to give a child credit for. A child could see something hard and carry it and still grow up to be a whole and useful person. The BLOWUPS' viewing platforms were the chance to see.

What the pixies had been careful to arrange, though — and here is where the gentle genius of the whole project revealed itself — was that the viewing was always paired with something else. After a child had walked the perimeter of a BLOWUP's courtyard and surveyed the silent city, the child was invited — by a small gesture of a pixie's wing — back into the interior of the courtyard. The interior of the courtyard was a classroom.

A classroom! Imagine it. A classroom inside a courtyard inside a BLOWUP, in the middle of what was, in fact, Central Park, though it was a Central Park that only children could see. The classroom had benches. The classroom had a small lectern, behind which a pixie was usually standing. The classroom had, on its far wall, a large green panel on which pixies had written, in tiny glittering pixie-script, the single sentence of the lesson for the day.

The lessons, at first, had been simple. Each day a pixie stood at the lectern and wrote a sentence on the green panel, and the children, sitting on the benches, read the sentence and discussed it. The sentences were not like the sentences of ordinary school. The sentences of ordinary school were often things like The cat sat on the mat or Two plus two is four. The sentences of the BLOWUPS' classrooms were things like The silence of a city is not its death but its listening, or Everyone who is waiting is already part of what they are waiting for, or The stillness of a park in February is not the same as the stillness of a park in August; it is the stillness of a park about to become a different thing.

These were sentences for children to grow into. The children did not fully understand them on the day they heard them. The children, nevertheless, remembered them. Years later, when they were grown, they would be walking through some street or some park and one of the sentences would come back to them, and they would understand it, finally, and be grateful. This was, the pixies had been briefed, how the best lessons work. The lesson is given in childhood. The understanding arrives later.

Priya, the oldest child, was particularly devoted to the classroom. Priya was a child of the type that exists in every generation, who takes a secret pleasure in the seriousness of grown-up things. Priya liked sentences. Priya liked hard sentences. Priya had written several of the BLOWUPS' classroom sentences down in a notebook that she carried everywhere, and she would, from time to time, open the notebook and read a sentence aloud, and the other children would fall quiet the way children do when something important is being said.

One afternoon, the pixie at the lectern wrote a particularly long sentence. The sentence was: The dormant city is not asleep. The dormant city is composting. Under the frozen surface, the dormant city is making the soil from which its own spring will grow. Do not mistake the silence for the end.

Priya copied it down. Priya read it aloud to the others. The others nodded. Mateo, who was six and did not always follow the more abstract sentences, nodded anyway, because he trusted Priya. Asha repeated the word "composting" several times to herself, because she liked the sound of it. The pixie at the lectern beamed.

That day, outside the classroom, on the perimeter of the BLOWUP's courtyard, something small began to happen. A child who glanced out saw it first. A single crocus, purple and unmistakable, had pushed up through the grass at the base of a BLOWUP's tubular ballast, down in the park far below. The child called the others. The others gathered at the balcony and looked. Yes. A crocus. The first crocus of the year. A small purple flag, asserting itself, in a place where that morning there had been nothing but brown grass.

The pixies, seeing the children see the crocus, made a tiny collective sigh of satisfaction. The dormant city was doing exactly what a dormant city is supposed to do. It was composting. It was preparing. Under the frozen surface, it was assembling the soil from which its own spring would grow.

Priya, in her notebook, wrote, beneath the sentence she had copied earlier, a sentence of her own. The sentence was: The crocus is the proof.

She showed it to the pixie at the lectern. The pixie at the lectern read it and beamed so hard that for a brief moment its whole body turned gold.

The architect, across the street, was at the desk. The architect had, that morning, modeled a BLOWUP whose particular job it was to release the first of the rainwater ballasts into the park below. The model was, in Rhino 3D, very nearly finished. The V-Ray render of it was set to run overnight. By morning, the architect would have an image of a BLOWUP in the act of pouring, with water falling in bright sheets onto the grass beneath. The architect had not yet named this image, but was thinking of calling it The Announcement.

In the imaginary park below, under the architect's attention, under the pixies' careful orchestration, the crocus was exactly one of many that were about to arrive. The children, standing at the balcony, could see, if they looked carefully, the green tips of other crocuses coming up. The park was preparing. The city, the dormant city in its predicament, was composting its way toward a new season.

And the playhouse, on Central Park South, watched the park and waited. The playhouse had been waiting, all along, for this moment. The playhouse had been designed, the architect now realized, for exactly this. The playhouse was a front-row seat to the city's coming spring.

A second generation of BLOWUPS are spawned as the spring blossoms fully. This cohort camouflages itself uniquely into campuses of uplifted structures.
The density of this set of BLOWUPS resembles an orchard planted to integrate into the existing fabric of the city grid.
The amalgamation of this process is facilitated by the pixies in daylight, as their shadows appear ethereal.
Level 1
BLOWUPS

Plate XI

Chapter Eleven

The Second Generation, and the Orchard of the Uplifted

The spring arrived in a single decisive afternoon.

There had been warnings — the crocus in the park, the lengthening light, the occasional run of three warm days in a row — but the actual arrival of spring, when it happened, had the suddenness that New York springs often do. One morning you woke up and the city was still, recognizably, a winter city. By lunchtime, you began to smell something in the air that had not been in the air the day before. By the middle of the afternoon, the first of the BLOWUPS had begun to pour.

Priya saw it first. She was at the yellow window, as she often was in those late-winter weeks, keeping her own quiet watch over the park. She was wearing a thick wool sweater that had been her grandmother's, and she had her notebook open on the windowsill. She was in the middle of writing something when she looked up and saw, on the other side of the yellow window, a BLOWUP in the park doing something she had never seen a BLOWUP do.

The BLOWUP was tilting.

It had been floating at its usual forty feet, attached to its usual tubular ballast of hedges below, and it had begun — very slowly, very deliberately — to tilt sideways. As it tilted, a small opening appeared along its lower edge. From the opening, water began to pour. Not a trickle. A cascade. A long, bright, sparkling sheet of water fell from the BLOWUP's belly, through the air, and onto the grass far below. The water caught the afternoon sun and threw back a curtain of small rainbows. The hedges below, absorbing the water into their tubular forms, went — audibly, if you were listening at the right frequency — ahhhhh.

Priya called the other children.

They all came to the yellow window. They stood in a row, with their faces pressed to the glass the way children stand in a row at a good aquarium. They watched the BLOWUP pour. They watched a second BLOWUP, elsewhere in the park, begin its own slow tilt, and then a third. They watched, in the course of perhaps twenty minutes, every BLOWUP in the park tilt and pour and right itself again, until the park below was dotted with dozens of small bright puddles, and the grass, which had been brown that morning, was already beginning — the children could see it happening in real time — to go faintly green.

This was the announcement. The BLOWUPS were announcing spring.

The architect, at the desk across the street, had been working on a particular V-Ray render all morning. The render was of a BLOWUP in the act of pouring. The architect had gone into the kitchen to make tea, and when the architect came back to the desk, the render was finished. The architect saw, on the monitor, the thing the children were watching through the yellow window: a BLOWUP tilting, water falling in bright sheets, rainbows in the air. The architect sat down very slowly. The architect had not, up until that moment, quite believed that the thing being made at the desk and the thing being seen through the imaginary playhouse's windows were the same thing. Now the architect believed it. The render on the monitor and the view through the yellow window had, for a brief and shimmering moment, perfectly coincided.

The architect whispered, to the empty apartment: "Oh, good."

And on the other side of the street, in the playhouse that was not quite there and not quite not there, the children saw the park receive the water, and the grass receive the water, and the long dormant earth of Central Park drink the water like a plant that had been out of a pot too long. A second crocus came up. A third. The first snowdrop asserted itself at the base of an elm. A bird — not a pigeon, a real bird, a thing with a song — landed on a branch and sang once, and then stayed, as if it had found the place it had been looking for.

Spring had come. The winter had ended. The city had lived.

And now, in the afternoons that followed, something new began to happen.

The BLOWUPS, having announced spring, began to have children.

This was — it should be said at once — a delicate phrase. BLOWUPS did not have children in the way humans have children. BLOWUPS had children in the way a fruit tree has fruit. A fruit tree does not give birth. A fruit tree simply, at a certain season, produces small new versions of itself — buds that swell into blossoms, blossoms that drop their petals and become fruit, fruit that ripens and contains seeds, seeds that, with luck, become new trees. The BLOWUPS did something analogous. At the first full warmth of spring, from the undersides of the existing BLOWUPS, small new BLOWUPS began to appear. They were buds at first. Then they swelled. Then they detached, gently, and floated down on their own little tubular ballasts, and settled

themselves into new positions in the city, and became — after a few days of looking slightly crumpled from the journey — a second generation of BLOWUPS.

The second generation was different from the first.

The first generation of BLOWUPS had been, as we have seen, concentrated in the park. They had been a large species, a building-scale species, with their topiary rooms and their alphabet faces and their grand pouring ceremonies. The second generation was smaller, denser, and less showy. The second generation was, in a word, orchard.

The second-generation BLOWUPS did not float in the middle of the park. They went outside the park. They distributed themselves into the streets of the city, in tight clusters, the way apple trees distribute themselves in an orchard. You could see, from the yellow window of the playhouse, little patches of second-generation BLOWUPS popping up all over the Upper East Side and the Upper West Side and parts of Midtown. They were tucked between buildings. They were settled onto the tops of low rooftops. They were suspended above empty lots and small courtyards. They did not compete with the buildings of the city; they slotted into the spaces between the buildings, the way a line of fruit trees slots into the margins of a farm.

This was the camouflage strategy. The second generation had learned, from the pixies, that architecture was most easily accepted by a city if it arrived in shapes the city already half-expected. An orchard was a shape the city could read. An orchard fit into a city in a way that a grove of floating patterned architectural balloons might not. The second generation of BLOWUPS, by arranging themselves in orchard-density, made themselves available to the city without demanding that the city first learn a whole new vocabulary to see them.

The children loved the second generation. They loved them because the second generation was, in a particular sense, more like what children had always wanted their own block to have. A child whose street had never had a tree could now, looking out the yellow window, see what their street would look like if the street had been given an orchard of BLOWUPS. The orchard made the street kinder. The orchard gave the street shade. The orchard gave the birds somewhere to land. The orchard, even though it was imaginary, taught the children to look at their own actual streets and notice the places where an orchard could, someday, go.

Mateo had a theory. Mateo said: "The second BLOWUPS are for the places where the first BLOWUPS can't go."

Priya said: "Yes. They're going everywhere the park isn't."

Asha said: "They're covering the rest of the city. So nobody gets left out."

This was correct. The second generation of BLOWUPS was redistributing the gift of the first. The first had been a gift to the park. The second was a gift to every block and every corner that was not, strictly speaking, the park. Nobody would get left out. Nobody would go, anymore, an entire summer without seeing a BLOWUP

on their walk to the grocery store. The city's gift to itself would reach, by orchard-distribution, every inhabitant of the city.

The pixies, during this period, were especially busy. They were the ones facilitating the amalgamation. A BLOWUP, once it had detached from its parent and floated down to its new location, needed help settling in. The help was mostly pixie-work. The pixies checked the tubular ballast. The pixies adjusted the cluster density. The pixies made sure no new BLOWUP was landing on top of a child's bedroom window, or blocking an elderly person's view of the sky, or inadvertently squashing someone's potted plants. Pixies were, it turned out, remarkably skilled site inspectors. They had the right scale for the work. They could see the local conditions that a building-scale intelligence would miss.

In the course of this work, the pixies' shadows, the children noticed, became — over the course of the spring — increasingly ethereal. A pixie in flight cast almost no shadow at all by late April. By May, a pixie's shadow was so faint that only the children, with their youthful and practiced eyes, could make it out. The pixies were becoming, in some way the children did not fully understand, more present and more transparent at the same time. They were everywhere. They were barely anywhere. They were facilitating. They were, in the architect's private language, the shadow-work of the spring. The amalgamation of the second generation of BLOWUPS into the existing fabric of the city grid was possible only because of them.

Priya, in her notebook, wrote a new sentence. The sentence was: In daylight, the best helpers have no shadow.

She showed it to Asha. Asha considered it, and said: "That is a good one to remember."

Priya underlined it. She knew, even at nine, that some sentences were worth underlining.

The architect, across the street, had begun a new series of renders. The new series was of the second generation of BLOWUPS in their orchard arrangements, with the pixies floating invisibly in the spaces between. The architect was rendering them against the backdrop of specific real streets. 83rd and Amsterdam. 106th and Broadway. 72nd and Columbus. The architect was mapping, render by render, where on the map of the real city the second generation would eventually want to go.

And the children, at the yellow window, were watching the map come into focus. The orchard was arriving. The city was getting ready, whether it yet knew it or not, for the long season of its flourishing. And somewhere on the horizon, somewhere uptown — through the north windows, which would in a few days begin to show their great gift — the rarest of the tribes was beginning, finally, to stir.

DOODADS are a specific species of architecture
only assembled in the aftermath of calamity.
They are rare and precious creatures, easily
identified by their golden coronets.
The DOODADS flourish in landscapes paired with
blushing topiary.
The inhabitants of the city thought the DOODADS
had gone extinct during the pandemic.
The germination of such a breed of architecture is
one of the pixies greatest powers.
Level 3
DOODADS

Plate XII

Chapter Twelve

The Doodads Return, and the Golden Coronets

Nobody was supposed to see the DOODADS.

That had been the working assumption of the grown-ups for months. The DOODADS, according to the rumor that had circulated in the architect's notes and in certain corners of the design community and among the pixies who had been briefed, had gone extinct. A species of architecture that only appeared in the aftermath of calamity — a species that required, in order to be germinated, a very specific set of conditions that the pandemic had not yet seemed to provide — the DOODADS had, many people assumed, simply failed to return. The inhabitants of the city, walking past the places where DOODADS had historically gathered, had mostly stopped looking for them. Nobody expected to see a DOODAD again. The DOODADS, like certain kinds of hope, were understood to belong to a previous era.

The pink windows of the playhouse had, through the entire long winter and into the early spring, shown almost nothing. A child pressing a nose to the pink window would see only a fuzzy, out-of-focus view of a landscape somewhere uptown — a landscape that seemed to be a park but that had no obvious features. The pink windows had been, politely, blank. The children had not complained. The children had understood, without being told, that the pink windows were waiting for something, and that the something had not yet arrived.

Then, one afternoon in late April, the pink windows cleared.

Asha noticed it first. She had gone to the pink window, as she sometimes did, to check — to see if anything had happened — and what she saw there that afternoon was a landscape in pin-sharp focus. She called to the others. The others came. They pressed their noses to the pink windows.

What they saw, through the pink windows, was a scene out of a story nobody had told them.

They saw a field. The field was in a part of the city that Priya, who was good at geography, eventually identified as being somewhere up around Morningside Heights — up where the park shifted into a different kind of green, where the city began to feel less like midtown and more like uptown. The field had grass. The field had paths. The field had, in the distance, the ghostly suggestion of tall gray apartment buildings. It was, in other words, an ordinary enough patch of the city — the kind of small urban meadow that a careful walker might have found, in certain upper Manhattan neighborhoods, even before the pandemic.

But the field was not empty. The field was full of something the children had never seen before.

What the field was full of was — the children struggled, initially, to put it into words — golden things. Tall, thin, golden things. They rose out of the grass like grass. They were the shape of grass blades, but much larger, and made of what looked like lace. Each one had a stalk — a long, golden, slender stalk — and at the top of each stalk there was a crown. A tiny golden crown, with little bumps and crenellations, shaped something like the crown one draws on the forehead of a king in a storybook. The crowns were, on closer inspection, not metal exactly. They were basketwork, or filigree, or something in between. They caught the light. They glittered. A slight breeze moved through the field, and the crowns nodded, one after another, the way a field of tall grass nods.

This was the DOODADS.

The DOODADS had come back.

The field was, as the pixies had long hinted, not at a random place. It was at a specific place — a place in the upper reaches of the city where, many years before, a different kind of calamity had left its mark. The architect had chosen the site carefully. A DOODAD did not appear just anywhere. A DOODAD needed ground that had, at some point in its history, absorbed a sorrow. The ground could be made new; the sorrow did not persist in any heavy way; but the ground had to have known something. The DOODADS sprouted from ground that had a memory. They were not, you could say, indifferent. They grew in places that mattered.

"Oh," said Asha, who had, we may remember, made the same small sound at the very beginning of the book when she had first looked out of the pink windows into what was then still a vague landscape. Her "oh" that day had been the oh of first sight. This "oh" was the oh of recognition — of seeing, at last, the thing the pink windows had been saving for her.

Mateo said: "The crowns."

Priya said: "Golden coronets."

She had read the word coronets in a book, once. She was proud of knowing it. It was the right word. A coronet was a small crown, the kind you gave to somebody who was not quite a king but who deserved,

nevertheless, to wear a crown. Each DOODAD's head — if a DOODAD could be said to have a head — was topped with exactly this. A small crown. An honoring. A gold insignia that said: this stalk, this particular one, is someone special.

The children looked at the field of golden coronets and their eyes filled, briefly, with tears. They did not know why, exactly, their eyes had filled with tears. They did not understand the weight of what they were looking at. They only knew that something about the field — the way the crowns nodded, the way the light caught them, the way the whole meadow had the hush of a cathedral — was the most beautiful thing any of them had ever seen, and beauty of that order sometimes makes a person's eyes fill even if the person is only seven.

The pixies, who were more active than ever now that the DOODADS had appeared, gathered around the children inside the playhouse. The pixies were explaining, in their wordless way, what had happened.

The DOODADS, the pixies said, are a species of architecture only assembled in the aftermath of calamity.

The children listened.

The pixies said: They are rare. They are precious. Their arrival is uncertain. They are, in the lore of architecture, the gift that must not be expected — the gift that comes only when it comes, and never when it is demanded.

The children listened.

The pixies said: The germination of such a breed of architecture is one of our greatest powers. We are, you could say, the midwives of the DOODADS. We prepare the ground. We sing into the earth the particular song that the DOODADS need to hear before they will rise. We sing until the earth is ready. And then we wait. And sometimes the earth does not open. And sometimes, months later, it does. Today, it did.

The children listened, and they understood, in the way children understand things — not with their minds, but with the place between their ribs.

The pixies said: The DOODADS appear when the worst is over. They do not appear while the worst is happening. They do not appear to cheer us through the hard part. They appear on the other side, when we have lived through it. They are not consolation. They are confirmation. They are the way the earth tells us, in an architectural language, that the calamity has ended.

Priya, who had been writing furiously in her notebook, paused. She looked up at the pixies. She said, in her clear nine-year-old voice:

"So the pandemic is over?"

The pixies did not answer immediately. Pixies were honest. Pixies did not exaggerate. The answer, the pixies said, is complicated.

The pixies said: The pandemic, in the medical sense, is not yet entirely over. There will be months still in which the virus does its work. There will be losses still to come. We cannot pretend otherwise.

The children nodded. They understood.

The pixies said: But the era of the pandemic, in the spiritual sense, has turned. The city has begun to recover in the ways that matter most. The silent streets have begun to fill. The dormant ground has begun to compost itself into new green. The children, who were the most forgotten audience, have begun to come back to the windows. And when all of this begins at once — when the recovery is underway, even if not yet complete — the DOODADS know to appear. They appear in the aftermath. And the aftermath has begun.

Priya wrote it down. The pandemic, in the medical sense. The pandemic, in the spiritual sense. She underlined the difference. She knew that was the sentence that mattered.

The field of golden coronets, out through the pink windows, nodded gently in the late April breeze. The crowns caught the afternoon sun and threw their tiny golden reflections up onto the apartment building walls behind them. The walls, from the children's distance, looked for a moment as if they were catching confetti.

The architect, at the desk across the street, had just finished the first V-Ray render of a DOODAD. The render, on the monitor, showed one single DOODAD — alone against a pale green ground, its coronet gleaming, its slender golden stalk slightly tilted toward the light. The architect had been working on this render for weeks. The coronet had been especially hard to get right. The architect had not wanted it to look costumey. The architect had wanted it to look like what it was: a solemn little golden acknowledgment, placed at the top of a slender stalk, rising out of ground that had known sorrow.

The architect, seeing the finished render, sat back in the chair. The architect did what the architect had been doing increasingly often in the past weeks, which was to put a hand over the mouth and breathe, quietly, and accept that the work was earning its keep.

Across the street, in the playhouse that was and was not there, the children were still at the pink windows. The field of DOODADS still nodded. A bird — a real bird again, one of the birds that had been returning to the city all spring — landed on the top of a coronet, looked around importantly, and sang. The coronet did not mind being sat on. The coronet had been, in some sense, waiting for the bird.

The calamity, the pixies had said, had ended. Or the era of the calamity had turned. Either way, the DOODADS were here. And the city, looking up at them from its streets and parks and rooftops and window seats and its four-colored playhouse on Central Park South, was beginning to remember what it felt like to be beautiful again.

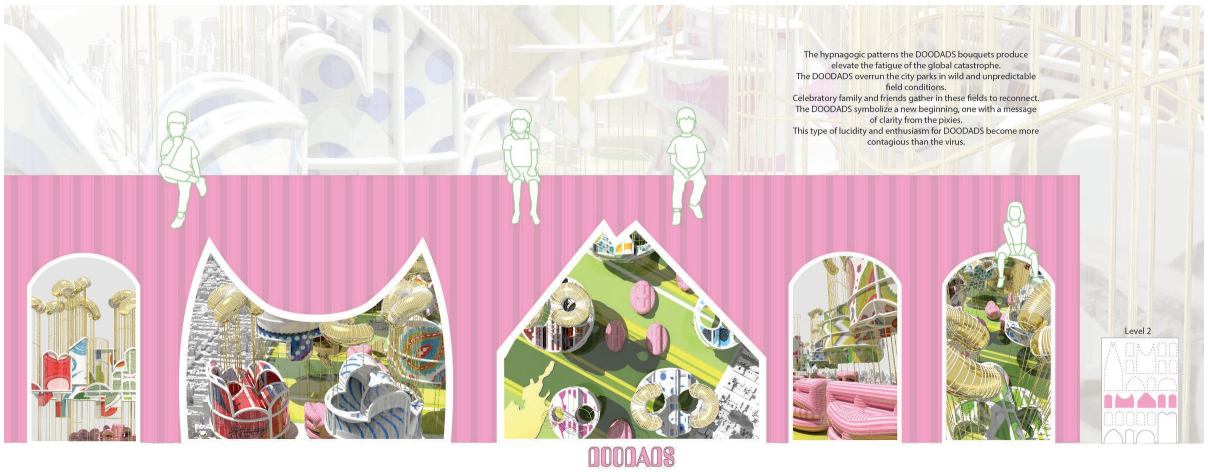

The hypnagogic patterns the DOODADS bouquets produce elevate the fatigue of the global catastrophe.
The DOODADS overrun the city parks in wild and unpredictable field conditions.
Celebratory family and friends gather in these fields to reconnect.
The DOODADS symbolize a new beginning, one with a message of clarity from the pixies.
This type of lucidity and enthusiasm for DOODADS become more contagious than the virus.
Level 2
DOODADS

Plate XIII

Chapter Thirteen

The Hypnagogic Fields, and the Reunion of the Living

The week after the DOODADS appeared, something extraordinary happened in the actual city.

It was not announced. Nobody organized it. There was no flyer, no hashtag, no official declaration. And yet, in the course of about ten days in late April and early May, a quiet collective behavior swept through the population of Manhattan. People began, for the first time in many months, to walk uptown.

People who had been pent up in small apartments downtown, people who had not been past 34th Street since March of the previous year, people whose sense of the city had shrunk to a three-block radius around their front doors — these people, in their ordinary shoes, set out from their apartments one morning and walked, or took the train, or biked, to parks uptown they had not visited in what felt like a geological era. They went to Riverside Park. They went to Morningside. They went to St. Nicholas Park and Jackie Robinson and Marcus Garvey. They went to the northern reaches of Central Park, the parts of the park most of them had never bothered to explore even in good times. They went to the small parks nobody had names for.

When they got there, they sat on the grass.

They sat in family groups — often, for the first time in a year, with members of their own families whom they had not been able to hug in that whole time. They sat in friend groups. They sat in what looked like a gathering of neighbors who had only known each other, previously, as passing faces in the hallway of a building. They sat, some of them, in couples who had been long apart, who had weathered the winter in separate places, and who had now, tentatively, come together again. They sat, some of them, alone — just alone in the grass, in the sun, not lonely but singular, and fine.

They did not, for the most part, know why they had come. If you had asked one of them, individually, why they had picked that particular park on that particular day, they would have said something mumbled about the weather, or about wanting a change, or about their doctor having told them to get out more. The real reason, they would not have named, because they did not know it.

The real reason was the DOODADS.

The DOODADS were calling them. Not with sound. Not with sight. With pattern.

The DOODADS, the architect had figured out in the course of modeling them, produced what one could only call hypnagogic patterns. Hypnagogic was a word the architect had borrowed from the study of dreams — it described, specifically, the state of mind between waking and sleeping, the state in which images float freely, in which the barriers between the conscious and the unconscious go soft, in which you see, sometimes, things that are not exactly dreams and not exactly thoughts. The DOODADS, the architect understood, broadcast a pattern of light and shadow and breeze and gold that put, into the minds of anyone who came near them, a soft hypnagogic state. In that state, people felt — without being able to say why — that the worst was over. That reconnection was possible. That their fatigue, finally, could be set down.

The fatigue of the global catastrophe, the pixies had been saying to each other all spring, was the heaviest thing in the world. It was heavier than grief. Grief had an object; grief was for specific people or for specific losses; grief, at some point, could be worked through. Fatigue was worse. Fatigue was the residue of having lived, for a long time, in a state of chronic low-grade alarm. Fatigue was what was left in a population when the acute emergency ended but the nervous systems had not yet understood that the acute emergency had ended. Fatigue was why, a year after the worst of the pandemic, people could still not sleep. Why they were still short-tempered. Why small things made them cry. The fatigue of the global catastrophe was a systemic tiredness that a single weekend of rest could not cure.

The DOODADS' hypnagogic patterns were the antidote to this fatigue. A person who sat in a field of DOODADS for even thirty minutes felt, at the end of those thirty minutes, a little less tired than at the beginning. A person who sat for two hours felt, at the end, as if they had slept well for the first time in a year. The patterns went into the eyes and down some strange biological route into the nervous system, and the nervous system, receiving the patterns, finally put down its guard. The fatigue released. The person, without even knowing it, exhaled.

This was the DOODADS' gift. The gift was the lifting of the accumulated exhaustion of a catastrophe.

And so people were called to the fields. They did not know they were being called. They came because they had somehow been nudged to come, and when they arrived they sat down, and when they sat down they relaxed in a way they had not relaxed in a year, and they began — many of them — to cry.

The crying, the pixies had been briefed, was a good sign. The crying meant that the system was draining. A nervous system that has been held in alarm for a very long time will, when it is finally given permission to stand down, often release through tears. These were not the tears of new sorrow. These were the tears of old sorrow, finally able to exit.

The children, at the pink windows of the playhouse, watched this. They watched the fields fill up. They watched the ordinary grown-ups of Manhattan — many of whom had not, in the children's memory, seemed capable of sitting still on grass for even five minutes — sit for whole afternoons on the grass of the upper parks, among the DOODADS, not doing anything, not looking at their phones, just sitting. The children watched grown-ups cry. The children watched other grown-ups reach out and put an arm around the crying grown-ups. The children watched entire families, after an hour or two of sitting in the field, stand up and embrace each other in ways they had not, apparently, embraced in a long time. The children saw adults hug their own adult parents, some of them for the first time in fourteen months, in fifteen months. They saw children — not the playhouse children, but regular children — run across the fields into the arms of grandparents whose arms they had not been allowed to enter for most of their small lives. They saw the whole collective embrace of a city that had, at last, been given permission to touch itself again.

It was, Asha said quietly, the most beautiful thing they had ever watched.

Priya was writing furiously in her notebook. She had not had time to think about sentences; she was just trying to get it all down. She wrote: The fields were full. She wrote: Everyone was hugging. She wrote: Grandmas and grandkids. She wrote: They are allowed, now, to touch each other. She wrote: The DOODADS make them remember how.

The pixies, in the middle of this, were doing something curious. They were, the children noticed, multiplying. Ordinarily there were a few dozen pixies around the playhouse at any one time. In the days after the DOODADS appeared, the pixies' number seemed to double, and then double again. New pixies were arriving from everywhere. Pixies were, the children deduced, being generated by the event. Each hug in each field produced, it seemed, a small new pixie — a pixie who then joined the swarm and carried forward the work of the pixies.

This was a new understanding. Pixies, it turned out, were not a fixed population. Pixies were the by-product of human reconnection. Every time two human beings who had been long separated embraced each other in a DOODAD field, a pixie was born out of the moment of the embrace. The pixie came into being in the little pocket of air between the two people. The pixie then detached, shook out its tiny wings, and went looking for useful work. There was plenty of useful work. The pixie got started immediately.

This explained, the children realized, something they had been quietly wondering about: why there were so many pixies, on some days, and comparatively few on others. The numbers tracked, precisely, the amount of tender human contact happening in the city on that particular day. A day of much embracing produced many

pixies. A day of little embracing produced few. The pixies were, in this sense, a visible index of the city's capacity for affection. When affection was flowing, the air filled up with them.

In the late spring of that year, the air filled up with them like nothing anyone had ever seen.

The pixies that were born in the DOODAD fields carried, forward into their lives, a particular message. The message had been given to them by the fields at the moment of their birth, and they delivered it wherever they went. The message was simple. The message was: this kind of clarity and enthusiasm is more contagious than the virus.

That was the phrase. The pixies knew it. The children heard it. The children repeated it to each other. The phrase was on everybody's lips, inside the playhouse, for several days.

More contagious than the virus. More contagious than the virus.

The phrase had in it a small joke about the word "contagion," which had been, for so long, the worst word. Now the word was being rehabilitated. Now the word meant something good. Something you could catch. Something you wanted to catch.

Joy was contagious. Reunion was contagious. Lucidity was contagious. Enthusiasm for the DOODADS was contagious.

And so, in the fields of the upper parks, the city spread its new contagion. People caught it from each other. They took it home. They gave it to their neighbors. They passed it to the people on the subway next to them. They passed it, sometimes, to strangers in the elevator, with a single kind glance that contained the whole package.

The DOODADS, from their golden field, watched all of this and nodded. Their coronets caught the light of a city that was — for the first time in a long time — ready to shine back.

The DOODADS begin to cross pollinate with other architectures.
Children return to classrooms drawing DOODADS in notebooks.
Teachers extend the myth of pixies.
Normalcy once yearned for has had a metamorphosis.
Level 1
DOODADS

Plate XIV

Chapter Fourteen

The Cross-Pollination, and the Metamorphosis of Normalcy

In the weeks that followed, the four tribes began to cross-pollinate with each other in earnest.

The children, at the playhouse, had already seen the beginning of this some weeks earlier — the moment when a MISFIT had strayed over into DINGBATS territory and the two had exchanged their architectural handshake. That moment had been, though the children did not know it at the time, the first demonstration of what was about to become a widespread practice. In the late spring and into early summer, the architect, modeling at the desk in the apartment on Central Park South, began to produce creatures whose lineage was not easily sorted. A DINGBAT with a golden coronet. A BLOWUP in MISFIT paisley. A DOODAD whose crown sat on a body of nested Russian-doll volumes. A MISFIT with the buoyancy of a BLOWUP, rising a little bit off the ground as it walked.

The creatures were hybrids. Nobody had told them to be hybrids. They had decided, of their own accord, that the boundaries between the tribes had served their purpose and that the time had come to mix.

The children watched this with great pleasure. They had always understood, somewhere in the backs of their small minds, that the four tribes were varieties of the same larger thing. They had divided the tribes into four colors because four colors was a useful organizing principle, but the children had never believed that a creature was bound for life to a single color. A creature could change. A creature could cross. A creature could, over time, belong to several tribes at once, or to none.

The pixies, facilitating all of this, were busier than ever. The pixies had a special role in cross-pollination. Cross-pollination, at any scale — whether between two plants in a garden or between two architectural tribes in a city — required a small helper to carry the exchange. Bees did it for flowers. Pixies did it for architectures.

A pixie would spend an afternoon at a MISFIT, picking up a little of the MISFIT's essence; and then the pixie would fly to a DOODAD, and would deposit the MISFIT's essence into the DOODAD's waiting receptive structure, and the DOODAD would, over the next few days, develop a small MISFIT feature — a patch of paisley, say, on one of its stalks. Slow work. Gentle work. But the work added up, and by midsummer half the creatures in the imaginary city were showing signs of mixed heritage.

The city's inhabitants — the actual grown-ups, walking their actual streets — had begun, during this same period, to do something similar in their own way. They had begun to remix their own lives. A person who had been, before the pandemic, an accountant in midtown had, over the long winter, started a small bakery in their apartment and had now, in the spring, begun to sell the bread at a little folding table in the farmer's market. A person who had been, before the pandemic, a theater actor had, over the long winter, taught themselves to make pots, and was now, in the spring, selling the pots alongside the bread. A person who had been an advertising executive had become, at some point during the year, a gardener. A person who had been a gardener had, at some point, become an advertising executive. Everyone, in ways large and small, was cross-pollinating their own life. The old rigid identities — I am X, only X, I have always been X — had softened. People were willing, more than before, to let themselves be a few things at once.

This was the hidden lesson of the pandemic, the architect had come to believe: that the long enforced pause had made it possible, for many people, to relax the iron grip of their previous selves. A person who has been told, gently and firmly, that they cannot do the thing they have been doing — the thing that has defined them for decades — is a person who is temporarily given a strange kind of freedom. They can, if they are brave, ask themselves whether the thing they have been doing is still the thing they want to do. They can, if they are braver, try something else. Most people, given this opportunity, did not take it. Most people went back to exactly what they had been doing. But a surprising number of people — more than anyone in the old dispensation had expected — took the opportunity and did something new. The city, after the long winter, contained more new bakers and new potters and new gardeners than it had contained the year before. The city was cross-pollinating. The city was, in its way, becoming a hybrid tribe.

The children, at the playhouse, were too young to have had this kind of reinvention opportunity personally. But the children watched the reinventions around them with great interest. A child's mother had started a small business making masks. A child's father had become, to his own surprise, a person who baked sourdough and meant it. A child's aunt had come out as a lesbian after forty years of not. A child's grandfather had started writing poetry. The children did not always, at their age, have the vocabulary to describe these transformations, but they understood that the grown-ups around them had been, in the course of the long year, transforming. And the grown-ups, being transformed, had somehow become — the children sensed this — a little more willing to listen to children than they had been before.

This was the great secret fruit of the cross-pollination season: the grown-ups were beginning, finally, to listen.

Children, for the first time in a long time, could say things that grown-ups would hear. A child could say, at the dinner table, "I am not going back to eating meat, I have decided," and the grown-ups would, instead of forcing the issue, ask the child why. A child could say, "I think I am maybe a boy, actually," and the grown-ups would not shut the conversation down but would, sometimes with difficulty, stay in it. A child could say, "I miss Grandma. Can we visit her more?" and the grown-ups would look at each other and say, "Yes. Yes we can." The old habit of steamrolling children's concerns in the name of adult efficiency had, for reasons that were not entirely traceable, weakened. Children could be heard.

And so the children of the playhouse, having seen the cross-pollinations in the imaginary city and the cross-pollinations in the real city, began to do something new themselves. They began to talk about what they had been seeing. Not to each other. They had already been doing that. They began to talk to the grown-ups.

Priya was the first. She had, by this point, filled two notebooks. She took one of the notebooks home to her parents, one evening at dinner, and she read them a page of it. The page was about the DOODADS. It was Priya's own description of a field of golden coronets and of what it had felt like to watch the grown-ups in the fields cry and hug. Priya's parents were, that evening, tired. Priya's parents had had a long day. Priya's parents had not, ordinarily, in a previous time, given Priya's notebook more than a glancing minute of polite attention.

That evening, though, something was different. Priya's parents set down their forks. They listened to the whole page. When Priya finished, Priya's mother said: "Is this — did you see this, sweetheart? Or did you imagine it?"

Priya said, with the clarity of a nine-year-old who has been thinking carefully about this question for some time: "I think I saw it. I think if you know where to look, you can see it too."

Priya's father said: "Will you show us where to look?"

And Priya, who had not been prepared for this question, thought about it for a while and then said: "I think I can. But you have to be slow. And you have to be willing."

Her parents said yes. Her parents, who had lived through the same long year the rest of Manhattan had lived through, and who had been reshaped by it as everyone had been reshaped, said yes.

The next day, Priya took them to a park. She did not, in the end, take them to the playhouse — the playhouse was something she was not sure she was allowed to share with grown-ups, and the playhouse, from what the pixies had said, would reveal itself to grown-ups only when grown-ups were ready to reveal themselves to it. But she took her parents to an actual park, one that she had identified as a likely place for a DOODAD field, and she told them to sit, and she told them to be quiet, and she told them to let their eyes go soft the way you let your eyes go soft to see a magic-eye picture.

They sat. They were quiet. Their eyes went soft.

And after a while — after perhaps twenty minutes, which in the time of Priya's parents was a very long time to sit still without checking a phone — Priya's mother said, in a voice that was a little higher than her usual voice: "Oh."

Priya's father said, a minute later: "Is that — oh."

What they were seeing, of course, was the first flicker, at the edges of their adult vision, of the DOODADS. They could see, now that they had sat quietly and let their nervous systems ease, the little golden crowns nodding at the edge of the meadow. They could not see them the way Priya could; they were seeing them as one sometimes sees a face in the pattern of leaves; but they were seeing them. They had crossed over.

Priya, being a kind child, did not gloat. She only said: "Yes. That's what I meant."

Her parents, being kind adults, did not feel the need to rationalize what they had seen. They only sat with it.

The grown-ups, in this small way and in many other small ways during those same weeks, were learning to see what the children had been seeing all along. And the normalcy that everyone had been yearning for, all through the long winter, had — in the process of being yearned for — quietly metamorphosed into something else. It was no longer the old normalcy, the normalcy people had missed. It was a new normalcy. A normalcy in which grown-ups could see pixies, at least a little. A normalcy in which children could say what they thought and be heard. A normalcy in which the old buildings of the city wore new scarves, and new buildings sprouted from old, and the ground uptown bloomed with golden coronets in memory of what had been lost and in celebration of what had survived.

The teachers, returning to their classrooms — because the schools were back in session now, tentatively, cautiously — extended the myth of the pixies. They told their students, in history class, in art class, in science class, small variations on the theme. They did not call them pixies always. Sometimes they called them attention. Sometimes they called them care. Sometimes they simply said: there are helpers, and if you are watching carefully, you will see them.

The children, returning to their classrooms, drew DOODADS in their notebooks. Teachers, looking over their shoulders, recognized the shapes and did not say anything critical. The teachers let the children draw. The drawings filled the margins. The margins overflowed into the pages. The pages, in many classrooms, began to look like small fields of golden coronets. The teachers smiled. The teachers were themselves, now, a little bit able to see.

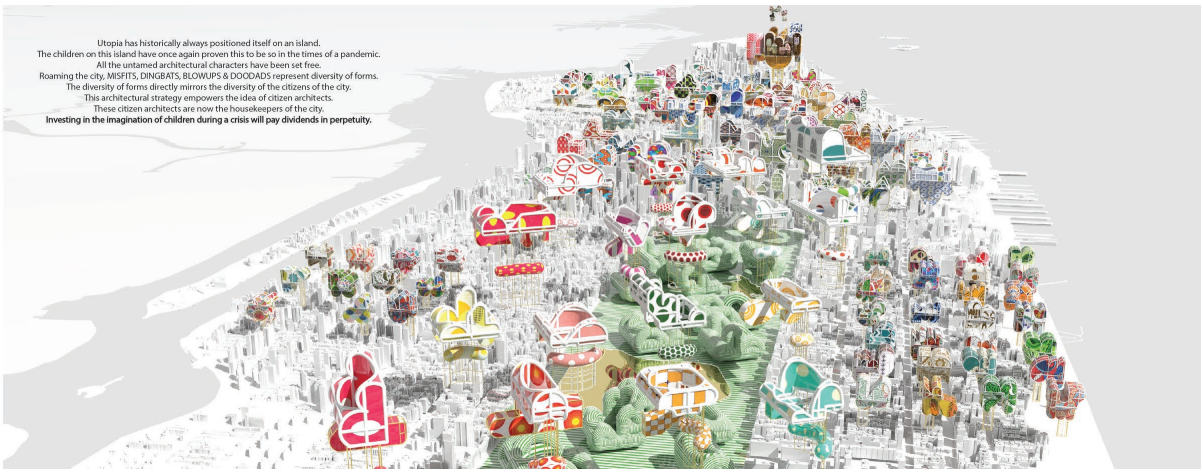

Utopia has historically always positioned itself on an island.
The children on this island have once again proven this to be so in the times of a pandemic.
All the untamed architectural characters have been set free.
Roaming the city, MISFITS, DINGBATS, BLOWUPS & DOODADS represent diversity of forms.
The diversity of forms directly mirrors the diversity of the citizens of the city.
This architectural strategy empowers the idea of citizen architects.
These citizen architects are now the housekeepers of the city.
Investing in the imagination of children during a crisis will pay dividends in perpetuity.

Plate XV

Chapter Fifteen

Utopia Has Always Been an Island, and the Citizen Architects

Utopia, it turns out, is always on an island.

This is a thing the architect had read somewhere, long before the pandemic, and had not taken especially seriously at the time. The idea was that, historically speaking, when people dreamed up a perfect society, they tended to place it on an island. Thomas More's Utopia was on an island. Plato's Atlantis was on an island. Bacon's New Atlantis — island. Samuel Butler's Erewhon — well, not an island exactly, but cut off from the rest of the world by mountains, which is an island's cousin. A great many of the major utopias of Western imagination had, the scholar had pointed out, chosen the island as their form. The architect had filed this fact away. The architect had not known, at the time, that the fact would come in handy.

Now, in the last month of the pandemic spring, the architect understood why utopias chose islands. Islands were islands. Islands had edges. Islands were, in their very shape, arguments for the self-containment of a community — arguments that a small society with a clear perimeter could organize itself in ways a large, boundaryless society could not. On an island, you could see where you stopped and the rest of the world began. On an island, you could do something different without having to convince the whole planet to do it with you. On an island, you could practice, in miniature, the kind of world you believed in.

Manhattan was an island.

The architect had, of course, known this all along — it is not news that Manhattan is an island — but the architect had not, until this spring, thought about it in the utopian sense. Manhattan was, after all, the island where all of this had happened. The island where the MISFITS had first emerged from their gardens. The island where the DINGBATS had quietly clung to the sides of brownstones. The island where the BLOWUPS had

floated above Central Park and poured their rainwater onto dormant grass. The island where the DOODADS had sprouted from the upper parks with their golden coronets. The island where the playhouse had sat on Central Park South, facing north into the park, and had welcomed eleven children — and then more — into its imagined four-sided seeing. If utopia was to be anywhere in the early twenty-first century, it would be here. It would be on the long narrow sliver of land between the Hudson and the East River, between the Battery and Inwood, between the bridge to Brooklyn and the bridge to the Bronx. It would be on this particular island, and not on any other.

The architect, one morning late in June, opened up Rhino 3D and began to model the final image. The image, the architect had understood for a while, was going to be a view of the whole island, seen from a high oblique angle, with all of the untamed architectural characters of all four tribes roaming everywhere. Not just in their original territories. Everywhere. The MISFITS mixing with the BLOWUPS. The DINGBATS hybridizing with the DOODADS. The island, from the height of a bird, covered end to end in the generous populous patterned swarm of what the architect and the children and the pixies had, over the long year, conjured.

The model took three weeks. The V-Ray render took, in the end, a little over two days. At the end of the two days, the architect woke up early, walked to the desk with the first cup of coffee in hand, and looked at the monitor.

The monitor showed an island blanketed in characters. The characters were everywhere. From the Battery in the south to the Inwood tip in the north, from the Hudson shoreline in the west to the East River in the east, every block had its tribe. Central Park was a riot of BLOWUPS and DOODADS. The streets of Harlem had MISFITS on every corner. The avenues of midtown had DINGBATS clinging to the sides of buildings in numbers no DINGBAT had ever clung before. The whole island, seen from this angle, looked less like a city and more like a single enormous garden in full flower. The gray of the buildings was still there, but the gray was in the background now. The foreground was color. The foreground was pattern. The foreground was a population of characters that had, at last, been set free.

The architect looked at this render for a long time. The architect did not speak. The architect simply looked. Then the architect saved the file, and the architect closed the laptop, and the architect got up, and the architect walked to the window on Central Park South and looked out across the street at what was, in the unimagined city, an ordinary low stone wall and an ordinary spring park behind it. But the architect could see, if the architect let their eyes go soft, what was also there. The island in its full populous flowering. The characters everywhere. The playhouse on Central Park South, small and bright, with eleven children at its windows and more arriving by the day.

Utopia had always been an island. And this was the island.

In the playhouse, that same morning, the eleven children — there were more than eleven by now, but the original eleven were still there, and they were still, by a kind of unspoken seniority, the council of the playhouse — were gathered in the middle of the floor, cross-legged, in a circle. Something was about to happen. They could feel it. Asha was fidgeting. Mateo was pretending not to fidget. Priya, who was the oldest, was sitting very still with her notebook open in her lap.

A pixie landed on Priya's pen. The pixie was, Priya recognized, an older pixie — one of the originals, one who had been around since the MISFITS' first migration. This pixie had a certain gravitas. When this pixie landed on your pen, you listened.

The pixie, in the wordless way pixies communicated with the older children now, said: Today is the day.

Priya asked: The day for what?

The pixie said: The day you find out why the playhouse was built.

Priya told the others. The others straightened up. A hush fell over the circle. The pixie, satisfied, flew into the middle of the circle and hovered there. The hovering pixie, in its wordless voice, addressed them all.

The pixie said: You have been brought here — not only you eleven, but all of the children who have visited this playhouse over these months — to learn a single lesson. The lesson is old. It is probably the oldest lesson there is. We will, today, put the lesson into the clearest words we can find.

The children waited.

The pixie said: The city is a house. The house is a city. You have heard this before. You have said it to each other. It is the refrain of the playhouse. Today we tell you why.

The pixie said: A house, in order to be a good house, requires someone to keep it. Not to own it. To keep it. A housekeeper is someone who tends to the well-being of a house — who opens the windows in the morning and closes them at night, who sweeps the corners, who waters the plants, who notices when a wall is peeling and attends to it, who remembers that a house is, at its best, a place where its inhabitants can flourish. A housekeeper is, in the deepest sense, a lover of houses.

The children nodded.

The pixie said: A city, likewise, requires someone to keep it. A city is a very large house. It needs someone to tend its well-being. Not one person. Many people. A great many people, working together, each in their own small way, opening windows, sweeping corners, watering plants, attending to walls.

The pixie said: These people are the housekeepers of the city. They are, in the old language, called architects. But architects, as the world has been using the word lately, means something narrower than what we mean. We mean, by architects, anyone at all who does the work of keeping the city well. This includes the people who

design buildings, yes. It also includes the people who tend the parks. The people who clean the streets. The people who look after the children. The people who teach in the schools. The people who bake the bread. The people who look out of windows, seriously, at the life of the city around them, and let themselves be made new by what they see. All of these are housekeepers. All of these are citizen architects.

The pixie said: That is what you — you eleven, and all the other children who have come here — are being trained to become. Citizen architects. Housekeepers of the city. It is not a profession. It is a disposition. You can be a citizen architect while doing any job at all, or while doing no job. You can be a citizen architect at age nine. You can be one at age ninety. You only have to do the work.

The pixie said: The work is this. Pay attention. Love what you see. Notice what is being neglected. Do one small thing, every day, to keep the city well. Watch the buildings. Watch the people. Watch the pixies — if you can still see them, and we hope you always will. Carry what you learn here back to the streets outside. Tell others. Invite them to see. The more citizen architects there are, the better the city keeps itself.

The children were very quiet.

The pixie said: The playhouse was built so that a small group of children, during a particular hard year, could become the first generation of citizen architects of the recovering city. You are the first. More will come. They will learn from you. You will learn from them. Over generations, the city will become a city that keeps itself, by being kept well by everyone who lives in it.

Mateo asked: Will we forget?

The pixie said, with great tenderness: Some of you will. Most of you, eventually, will forget many things. Children grow up. Growing up involves forgetting. That is not a failure. It is the price of the thing.

The pixie said: But some of you will remember. And the ones who remember will carry what they remember into their ordinary adult lives, and they will — without making a big deal of it — keep the city well. They will plant the trees. They will vote for the good candidates. They will paint the murals. They will teach the other children. They will, in their own ways, do what they learned here. And that will be enough. The city only needs a percentage of its inhabitants to be citizen architects. Not everyone. Just enough.

Priya, writing this down in her notebook, looked up. Priya said: How do we make sure we are one of the ones who remembers?

The pixie said: You can't. Memory does what memory does. But you can make it more likely. You can make it more likely by, from time to time, for the rest of your life, looking for us. Go to a park. Sit down. Let your eyes go soft. See if a golden coronet shows up at the edge of your vision. If it does, smile and say hello. If it doesn't, come back next week and try again. The ones who keep looking are the ones who keep seeing. And the ones who keep seeing are the ones who keep being the citizen architects of the city.

The pixie ended its address. The pixie rose into the air, made a slow final circle of the playhouse, and settled back onto Priya's pen.

Priya wrote one last sentence into the notebook. She wrote: Investing in the imaginations of children during a crisis will pay dividends in perpetuity.

She had heard this sentence somewhere, though she could not remember where. The sentence had simply been in the air. (The sentence had been in the architect's head, on the other side of Central Park South, for weeks; the sentence had travelled, carried on pixie wings, into Priya's notebook now.) It was the sentence that summed everything up. Priya circled it twice. She closed the notebook.

The eleven children stood up, one by one. They looked at each other. They smiled the smiles of children who have been given something enormous and have accepted it.

Asha said: "Let's go look out the windows."

They did. They went to all four windows at once, three or four children at each, and they looked out. The island was blooming. The characters were everywhere. The city was keeping itself well.

And the architect, across the street in the apartment on Central Park South, turned from the window and began to pack up the render files, because the project, the architect had understood at last, was finished.

The children had it now.

The city had it now.

The housekeeping, from here on, was everybody's.

Afterword

On Giving the Gift Away

There are, in the life of any project, certain moments in which the project becomes something larger than the person who started it, and then — not long after — something larger than the person can contain. The project rises up. The project asks to be let out of the apartment. The project says: I am ready now to go into the world. Please do not hold me back.

This novella has come to that moment. I can feel it tugging at the pages.

I want to say a few things, before I let it go, about what I have learned in the long season of making it.

The first thing I have learned is that architecture, properly understood, is not a profession. It is a disposition. I say this with some caution, because I have, technically speaking, spent my adult life acquiring the credentials that the profession requires. I do not want to dismiss those credentials. They have their uses. They have given me the vocabulary and the patience and the technical skill to do what I have been trying to do. But the credentials are not the architect. The architect is, I have come to believe, whoever is willing, today, to pay careful loving attention to the life of the city — or the neighborhood, or the block, or the single room — that they happen to be in. The credentials make some people architects. The disposition makes the rest of us.

The second thing I have learned is that joy is a discipline. I did not know this when I began the project. I suspected it. I had heard other people say it. But I did not, truly, know it until I spent the long winter of the pandemic watching what happened when I tried to make a cheerful building in Rhino 3D for eight hours a day. The first few days, the cheerfulness came easily. After a while, the cheerfulness became harder. The world outside the window was not cheerful. My own feelings were not cheerful. The news was not cheerful. The cheerfulness had to be, in a certain sense, earned. I had to go looking for it. I had to sit at the desk and refuse to leave the desk until the cheerful thing I was trying to make was, in fact, cheerful. There were many afternoons in which I did not succeed. There were many afternoons in which I only produced a slightly less gray version of something that should have been bright. But the discipline — the daily returning to the desk and asking the desk for joy — turned out to be, slowly, a thing I got better at. Joy, I learned, can be practiced. Joy is a muscle. Joy is something you show up for.

The third thing I have learned is that the imagination is a civic resource. I mean this in the most literal way. A city is, in the long run, no better than what its inhabitants can imagine for it. If the inhabitants can only imagine what already exists, the city will not change. If the inhabitants can imagine something better, the city has at least a chance. This means that the imagination — all of our imaginations, each of our particular personal imaginations — are a kind of civic commons. A person who lets their imagination go flat is, in a quiet way,

withdrawing from the collective project of the city. A person who cultivates their imagination — who reads strange books, who listens to children, who lets themselves see the pixies at the edges of their vision — is, in a quiet way, investing in the collective project. The children in this novella, who can see what grown-ups have trained themselves not to see, are not whimsical. They are civic assets. They are showing the rest of us what our own imaginations are capable of, when we remember how to use them.

The fourth thing I have learned is that a crisis is also an opening. This is the hardest thing to say, because crises are real, and the losses in them are real, and I do not wish to romanticize what was, for a great many people, a period of grief and exhaustion and fear. But I would not be honest if I did not say that, for me, the pandemic was also the thing that gave me the time and the strangeness to make this work. In the old velocity of my life, I would not have made these images. I would not have written these sentences. I would not have built, in my head and in my software, a playhouse on Central Park South for eleven children who did not, in any ordinary sense, exist. The pandemic made a space for this work by the terrible mechanism of canceling most of the other work. I have tried to use the space well. I hope the use of the space redeems, in some tiny partial way, the cost of its opening.

The fifth thing I have learned, and it is the one I most want to pass on, is that the work of keeping the city well is not supposed to be done alone. It is not meant to be the private burden of a few professionals, or a few activists, or a few elected officials. It is everyone's work. If you read this novella, in whatever part of whatever city you live in, I hope you will take from it the permission — which you did not need me to give you, but which I am giving you anyway — to consider yourself an architect of the place you live. Watch it carefully. Love it well. Do one small thing for it today. Tomorrow, do one more. Over a lifetime, these small things add up to a city.

That is the whole of the argument. I have taken a great many pages to make it. I hope the pages have been worth the time they asked of you.

I am going to close this book now. I am going to let the project go into the world. I am going to step back to the window on Central Park South and watch, for another long minute, the park I have watched all this time, and I am going to say — as I have learned to say, because it is a good thing to say — "thank you." Thank you to the park. Thank you to the city. Thank you to the children. Thank you to the pixies, whom I have tried to describe as accurately as I can, though only the children will know whether I got them right.

And thank you to you, the reader. You came to the window. You looked out. You saw what you saw.

Now you are, whether you meant to be or not, one of the housekeepers.

Welcome to the work.

— Surjan at the window on Central Park South the last day of a long spring

Catalogue of Plates

Fifteen Renders Conceived, Modeled, and Rendered by the Author, Without AI Assistance

The fifteen plates reproduced in this volume constitute the visual architecture of the novella and correspond, one for one, to the fifteen boards of the original architectural portfolio from which this work emerged. Each plate was conceived by the author, modeled volumetrically in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray. No artificial intelligence was used in the creation of these images. The patterns, surfaces, volumes, and compositional decisions are entirely the author's own.

Plate numbers correspond to the original BOARD numbering. A brief curatorial note accompanies each plate, indicating its place in the narrative sequence and flagging key formal moves.

Plate I · BOARD 00

The Architect as Housekeeper of the City

Introductory Plate

The architect is the housekeeper of the city. As a housekeeper, the architect doesn't just solve problems. They also create hope and desire.
In isolation, the architect designs fantasies of their imagination to build a playhouse full of possibilities within the city. This playhouse is free of all gravitational forces. Therefore, it is suspended in a timeless place, awaiting an audience willing to accept it without reservations.
The COVID-19 pandemic has created such a condition—one in which the architect needs to assemble fantasies for a forgotten audience, our children.
This portfolio expands one playhouse, seen through a child's eyes looking outward from its windows, designed to reveal a city full of wild architectural characters. The playhouse's four elevations have been color-coded (Orange, Blue, Yellow & Pink) to specify the architectural characters with children's names. Orange facades are MISFITS, Blue is DINGBATS, Yellow is BLOWUPS, and Pink are DOODADS. As the series of MISFITS, DINGBATS, BLOWUPS, and DOODADS are sequentially revealed through eleven sets of windows, the children rediscover the city, and, just as importantly, the architect rediscovers their inner child. This discovery is an unexpected gift in the pandemic's suspended time, one ready to be unpackaged for all ages.
The parade of these untamed architectural characters wandering throughout the city is not a carnival; it's a time machine! This time machine moves forward, backward, and ahead. Once again, it is a means of housekeeping that the architects must tend to for the city's current and future generations. This portfolio reveals the architect as a mindful housekeeper of the city by allowing the visions seen from the playhouse to fuel all future constructed projects.
'The city has forsaken its identity.
It has become an onlooker instead of a participant, an isolated soul amidst millions of isolated souls.
But children withdraw from this paradox.
They discover its identity against all odds.'

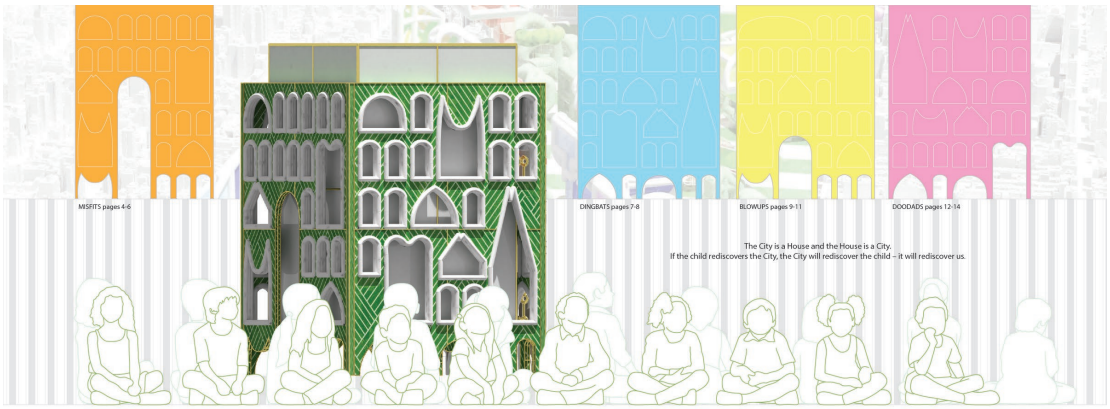
The opening plate establishes the book's governing conceit. At left, a cluster of untamed architectural characters floats suspended, weightless, in the pale cream of a conceptual void. At right, a long block of text articulates the central argument: the architect is the housekeeper of the city, charged with making hope and desire as much as with solving problems. At the base of the plate, rendered in soft green outline, a row of children sits attentive, facing the reader. The children will, over the course of the novella, migrate from this diagrammatic position at the foot of the argument into their full role as protagonists. The pale palette and suspended composition announce the plate's timelessness: this is not yet a particular place. It is an invitation.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate II · BOARD 01

The City is a House and the House is a City

The Playhouse in Elevation


MISFITS pages 4-6
DINGBATS pages 7-8
BLOWUPS pages 9-11
DOODADS pages 12-14
The City is a House and the House is a City.
If the child rediscovers the City, the City will rediscover the child – it will rediscover us.

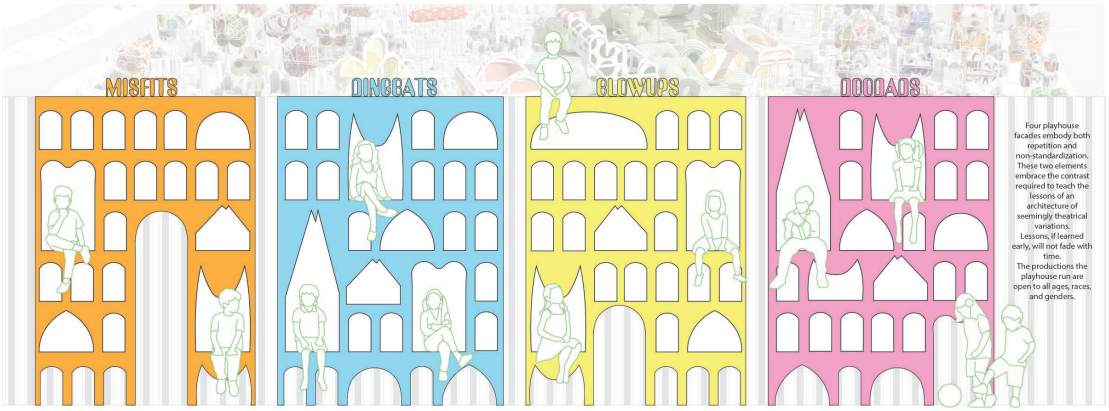
The four-façaded playhouse is shown here in frontal elevation, with the green herringbone of its southern face open to reveal the arched interior windows. To the right, smaller solid-color silhouettes of the three remaining façades — cyan (DINGBATS), yellow (BLOWUPS), magenta (DOODADS) — establish the color coding that organizes the entire novella. Seated children, rendered again in pale green outline, gather at the playhouse's base, leaning toward each other in attitudes of listening. The refrain inscribed at the right — "The City is a House and the House is a City" — becomes the novella's recurring touchstone. This plate introduces the playhouse as a theater, and the children as its first audience.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate III · BOARD 02

Four Facades and the Theater of Variations

Repetition and Non-Standardization


MISFITS
DINGBATS
BLOWUPS
DOODADS
Four playhouse facades embody both repetition and non-standardization. These two elements embrace the contrast required to teach the lessons of an architecture of seemingly theatrical variations.
Lessons, if learned early, will not fade with time.
The productions the playhouse runs are open to all ages, races, and genders.

Here the four façades are shown flattened and arranged horizontally, so that their differences become legible at a single glance. Each is uniform in color — orange, cyan, yellow, magenta — yet each carries a subtly different arrangement of arched and gabled openings. Seated children in green outline cluster at each wall, in positions both playful and contemplative. A child perches at the apex of the yellow wall; another reads at the foot of the magenta. The plate stages the novella's pedagogy of same-but-different: repetition gives rhythm, variation gives meaning. "Lessons, if learned early, will not fade with time" — the text inscribed at the right is the plate's quiet promise to the children depicted within it.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate IV · BOARD 03

The Misfits, and the First Garden of the Follies

MISFITS — Level 3

The MISFITS are the first generation of architectural follies designed during the pandemic.
Hugging the ground plane closely, they create a series of modern day primitive huts.
The MISFITS surface patterns become a garden and reflect the artificial landscape in which they have settled.
A series of floating aviaries also provide shelter and act as temporary weigh stations for pixies.
Level 3
MISFITS

The orange field of MISFITS country fills the lower register of the plate. Above, against a washed-out garden horizon, the first migration of untamed patterned creatures can be seen: MISFITS resting on the ground plane, their surfaces embroidered with paisleys, poppies, and folk patterns borrowed from the vocabulary of textile rather than of building. Six windows below frame individual MISFITS in close-up, allowing their particular costumes — rose-and-leaf on one, ochre and lime on another — to be studied. The plate makes clear the MISFITS' essential disposition: low to the ground, garden-dwelling, modest, the first generation of the recovery. A child in green outline sits at the upper right, keeping watch over the garden.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate V · BOARD 04

The Misfits Migrate, and the Color Returns

MISFITS — Level 2

The MISFITS slowly migrate beyond the boundaries of the garden in search of permanent sites within the city.
In doing so, they highlight the extreme monochromatic state of architecture within the metropolis.
The colorful and playful architecture of the MISFITS are a symbol to all the citizens that buildings should directly reflect the diversity of its inhabitants.
Level 2
MISFITS

Having departed the garden, the MISFITS are now seen in their migration into the monochromatic city. Against the orange ground of the plate's field, six windows reveal individual MISFITS standing on thin legs beside the silver-grey buildings of Lower Manhattan — poppies beside cast iron, greens beside brick. The large composition at the lower left shows a MISFIT in pattern-heavy regalia hovering at the scale of a building, while the figure at the lower right frames a MISFIT against the peaked silhouette of an old townhouse. This plate argues, more forcefully than any other, that the monochromatic city is not a fact but a choice — a choice the MISFITS, by their simple colorful presence, are gently correcting.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate VI · BOARD 05

The Misfits Speak the Vernacular of Compassion

MISFITS — Level 1

The urbanism of MISFITS is unruly and random.
This unpredictability produces an appeal that attracts designers near and far.
As designers study the MISFITS architectural behaviors, it becomes clear they are a tribe with an unbreakable code.
The pixies offer their assistance and translate the code.
Its meaning is simple, yet powerful.
The MISFITS speak the vernacular of compassion for individuals per freedom of expression.
Level 1
MISFITS

A more urban density now prevails: the MISFITS have saturated the streets of Lower Manhattan, and the texture of the plate shifts from migration to inhabitation. At the left, three small arched windows show dense views of the MISFITS' urban life; at the lower left, a single green-scaled creature blooms at the scale of a building. At the center, a block of text inscribes the novella's most important sentence: "The MISFITS speak the vernacular of compassion for individuals per freedom of expression." At the right, a green-patterned MISFIT soars under a peaked gable, welcoming a child figure perched at its edge. The plate makes the case, in formal terms, for a city of walls that reflect the diversity of the bodies passing before them.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate VII · BOARD 06

The Dingbats Emerge, Hidden in Plain Sight

DINGBATS — Level 2

The DINGBATS try to hide in plain sight within the city.
Attaching themselves to existing structures, they spotlight the condition of new versus old.
Over time the DINGBATS accumulate and form towers as well unto themselves.
The pixies frequent the inhabitants of the towers, but only children can hear their wishes.
The unspoken wishes of strangers for an architecture of harmony.
Level 2
DINGBATS

The cyan field of DINGBATS country now prevails. The central composition shows a DINGBAT in purple scalloped pattern nested among the gray spires of Manhattan's midtown silhouette — the shy creature's chosen camouflage. Around it, smaller arched windows frame the DINGBATS attaching themselves to the sides of existing buildings, spotlighting the condition of new versus old. To the upper right, a larger arched opening reveals a proto-tower of accumulated DINGBATS — what the children will come to call the Wobble Tower. The plate introduces the DINGBATS' paradoxical logic: they are shy, and yet they accumulate; they attach themselves to what exists, and yet in time they form new architectures unto themselves. Pixies, the plate text notes, frequent these towers and gather the unspoken wishes of strangers.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate VIII · BOARD 07

Dingbats Housing, and the Unity of Generations

DINGBATS — Level 1

The desire for harmony is made concrete through the establishment of DINGBATS Housing.
The DINGBATS Housing displays nested conditions of volumes inside of volumes. These nested volumes of forms represent the unity of multi-generations living and working from home.
As the effects of the pandemic rage on, isolation produces conditions in which DINGBATS Housing grows exponentially. As seasons pass, the pixies intervene and MISFITS are seen emerging from clusters of DINGBATS Housing as a symbol of hope.
Level 1
DINGBATS

The plate's centerpiece is a house-shaped elevation revealing the DINGBATS Housing in section: nested volumes within volumes, patterned in cream-blue scales and enclosing, in their innermost chamber, the suggestion of a family at the hearth. Around this central house, smaller arched windows frame variations on the housing typology — Russian-doll clusters, patterned façades, oblique views of inhabited courtyards. At the lower right, a new creature can be seen emerging from a DINGBATS cluster: a small MISFIT, born of the nested housing, walking out into the open city. The plate's argument is the novella's housing argument: a dwelling must honor the concentric privacies of multi-generational family life, and must be pandemic-proof by design.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate IX · BOARD 08

The Blowups and the Alphabet of Spring

BLOWUPS — Level 3

The BLOWUPS visually express a hybrid combination of emperhal and unnatural architectures.
The apparent buoyancy of the BLOWUPS is counterbalanced by tubular ballast.
The tubular ballast is also transformed by necessity for the unnatural landscape acting as topiary rooms the scale of buildings.
The pixies dwell inside the jumbo topiary rooms and welcome all visitors into striated experiential environments.
The elevational viewpoint of the BLOWUPS act out an alphabet for children teaching of changes in the pandemic globally.
Level 3
BLOWUPS

The BLOWUPS enter against a banded yellow ground. At the top of the plate, a pale-toned field shows the floating, ballasted BLOWUPS in their full mushroom-and-pill-shaped variety, their polka-dotted and striped surfaces contrasting with the mint-green tubular topiary below. The lower register of the plate presents the BLOWUPS' central panorama: a vast green interior room formed of tubular hedge-architecture, punctuated by red-and-white striped forms overhead. Three smaller windows at the right show individual BLOWUPS composing the elevational alphabet — letters of the pandemic lesson, carried in architectural form. The plate asserts architecture's capacity to be simultaneously pedagogical and buoyant: a building can teach, and it can float.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate X · BOARD 09

Classrooms Under Glass, a Silent City in Waiting

BLOWUPS — Level 2

Oblique projections of the BLOWUPS divulge the interior courtyards for public gatherings.
The courtyards double as educational classrooms for all citizens.
The perimeter of the BLOWUPS courtyards allow for panoramic viewing platforms for children to survey the silent city in a predicament.
The pixies scripture preach of a dormant city that later blossoms into a bountiful spring.
The BLOWUPS storage of rainwater ballast will irrigate the city's park to signal the arrival of the long awaited season.
Level 2
BLOWUPS

This plate divulges the interior courtyards of the BLOWUPS, revealed through oblique projection. Eight arched windows frame the courtyards from above and within, showing red-and-pink fabric creatures suspended against panoramic views of a silent city, and green-striped topiary volumes arranged as classrooms. A large peaked window at the lower right renders a raised perimeter from which a child figure surveys the city below. The plate introduces the BLOWUPS' role as custodians of pedagogy and water: their rainwater ballast, stored through the long winter, will soon irrigate the dormant park and signal the arrival of spring. The plate's prevailing tone is patience — the patience of a city waiting to be given permission to bloom.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate XI · BOARD 10

The Second Generation, and the Orchard of the Uplifted

BLOWUPS — Level 1

A second generation of BLOWUPS are spawned as the spring blossoms fully. This cohort camouflages itself uniquely into campuses of uplifted structures.
The density of this set of BLOWUPS resembles an orchard planted to integrate into the existing fabric of the city grid.
The amalgamation of this process is facilitated by the pixies in daylight, as their shadows appear ethereal.
Level 1
BLOWUPS

The second generation of BLOWUPS is shown here spreading beyond the park into the wider city. Seven arched windows across the plate present the new BLOWUPS in orchard formation — small, dense, distributed — camouflaged among the silver-grey towers of the city grid. A large gabled figure at the left frames a single second-generation BLOWUP in red-and-white scallops against a yellow-green striped interior, with a small child figure perched at its apex. At the lower center, a washed-out panoramic view suggests the ghost of the first generation overhead, ethereal, their shadows — as the plate text notes — barely visible. The plate is the novella's quiet argument for distribution: that a gift, to be truly a gift, must reach every corner.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate XII · BOARD 11

The Doodads Return, and the Golden Coronets

DOODADS — Level 3

DOODADS are a specific species of architecture
only assembled in the aftermath of calamity.
They are rare and precious creatures, easily
identified by their golden coronets.
The DOODADS flourish in landscapes paired with
blushing topiary.
The inhabitants of the city thought the DOODADS
had gone extinct during the pandemic.
The germination of such a breed of architecture is
one of the pixies greatest powers.
Level 3
DOODADS

Against the pink and magenta striped ground, the DOODADS appear for the first time in their full characteristic form: slender golden stalks rising from the grass, each topped with a small filigree coronet. Twelve windows frame them from many angles — close on a cluster, far back across a meadow of crowns, looking up from beneath their swaying canopy. The central peaked window presents a single large DOODAD in cerulean and magenta, with its golden filigree coronet visible against a brilliant green ground. The plate's governing argument, inscribed in text at the right, is the DOODADS' thesis: they are rare, they are precious, they are assembled only in the aftermath of calamity, and their germination is the pixies' greatest power. The aftermath has begun.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate XIII · BOARD 12

The Hypnagogic Fields, and the Reunion of the Living

DOODADS — Level 2

The hypnagogic patterns the DOODADS bouquets produce elevate the fatigue of the global catastrophe.
The DOODADS overrun the city parks in wild and unpredictable field conditions.
Celebratory family and friends gather in these fields to reconnect.
The DOODADS symbolize a new beginning, one with a message of clarity from the pixies.
This type of lucidity and enthusiasm for DOODADS become more contagious than the virus.
Level 2
DOODADS

The plate's central composition is an axonometric view of a park field overrun with DOODADS and their paired blushing topiary — pink, magenta, and green forms scattered across the green plane in wild field condition. Flanking this center, two arched windows frame close-up views of the DOODAD interior: a gathering of patterned, ribboned, ornamental creatures paired with golden coronets, the kind of assembly that might occur at a celebration. At the top, three green-outlined figures sit in quiet repose, surveying the fields below. The plate text articulates the DOODADS' therapeutic function: their hypnagogic patterns elevate the fatigue of global catastrophe; their fields are where families reconnect; their message of clarity is more contagious than the virus.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate XIV · BOARD 13

Cross-Pollination, and the Metamorphosis of Normalcy

DOODADS — Level 1

The DOODADS begin to cross pollinate with other architectures.
Children return to classrooms drawing DOODADS in notebooks.
Teachers extend the myth of pixies.
Normalcy once yearned for has had a metamorphosis.
Level 1
DOODADS

Five arched windows arrayed across the magenta ground reveal the DOODADS in their most intimate forms, cross-pollinated with other tribes. Golden coronets appear over DINGBAT bodies; MISFIT patterns wrap DOODAD stalks; a pink pill-shaped form in the fourth window carries the geometric logic of a BLOWUP. Green-outlined child figures perch at the top of the stripes, watching the hybrids below. The plate is the visual demonstration of the novella's penultimate argument: that the four tribes were never truly separate, and that their cross-pollination is the birth of a new architectural grammar. "Normalcy once yearned for has had a metamorphosis" — the text inscription confirms what the images have already shown.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

Plate XV · BOARD 14

Utopia Has Always Been an Island

Citizen Architects of the Flourishing City

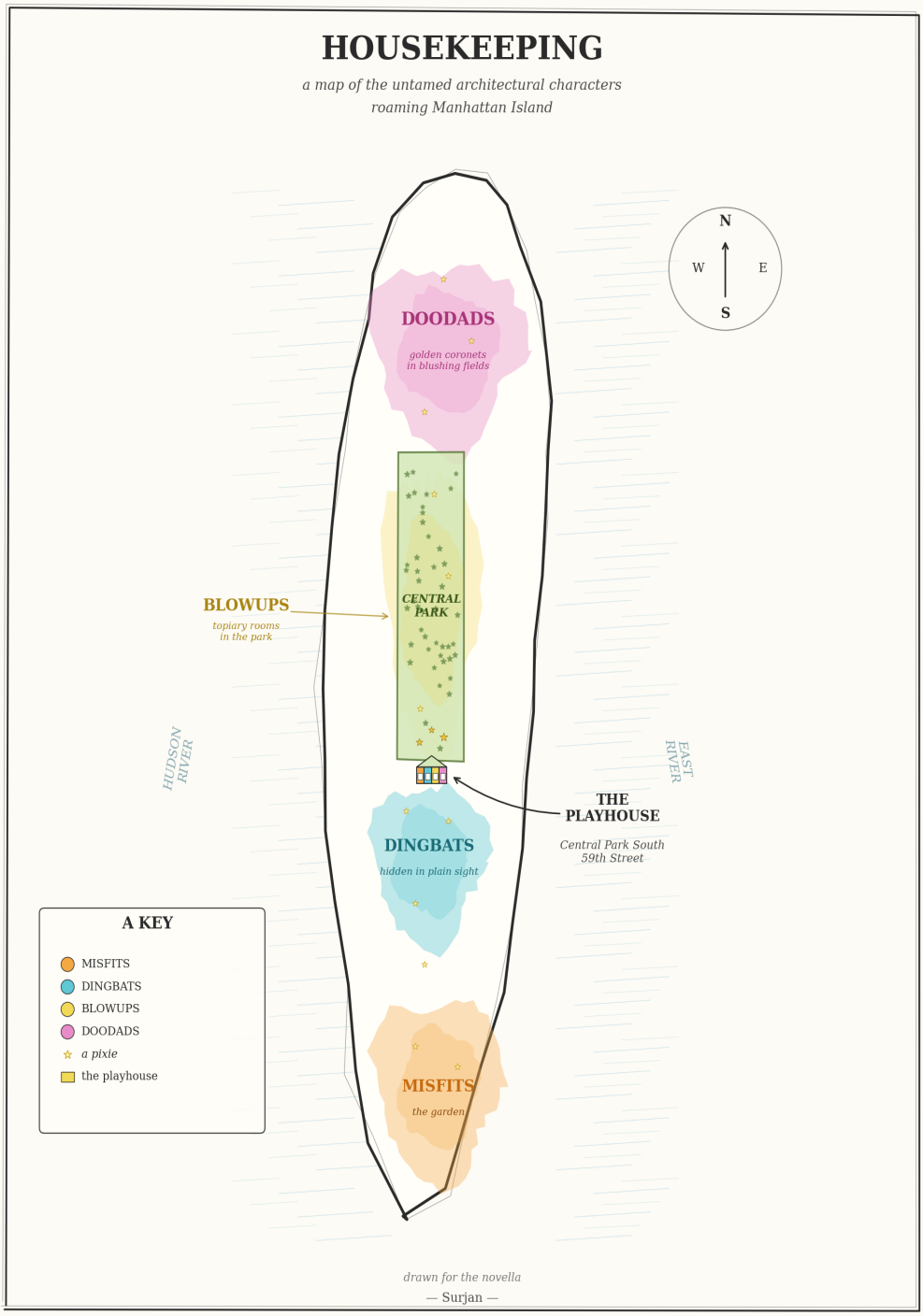
Utopia has historically always positioned itself on an island.
The children on this island have once again proven this to be so in the times of a pandemic.
All the untamed architectural characters have been set free.
Roaming the city, MISFITS, DINGBATS, BLOWUPS & DOODADS represent diversity of forms.
The diversity of forms directly mirrors the diversity of the citizens of the city.
This architectural strategy empowers the idea of citizen architects.
These citizen architects are now the housekeepers of the city.
Investing in the imagination of children during a crisis will pay dividends in perpetuity.

The concluding plate shows the island of Manhattan from a high oblique aerial angle, its full length from the Battery at the lower left to Inwood at the upper right. Every visible block of the island is covered in the populous parade of untamed architectural characters. The green of Central Park is thickened with BLOWUPS and DOODADS; the streets of Midtown bristle with DINGBATS; the Lower Manhattan garden of the MISFITS spills outward into the avenues; and the northern reaches of the island rise toward a crowded horizon of hybridized tribes. A block of text at the upper left inscribes the novella's closing thesis: that utopia has historically always been on an island, that the children of this island have proven it so again, and that — investing in the imaginations of children during a crisis — will pay dividends in perpetuity. This is the plate toward which the entire novella has been moving: the city, flourishing, in the hands of its citizen architects.

Conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D, and rendered in V-Ray by the author. No AI used.

A Map of the Island

showing the territories of the four untamed tribes and the playhouse on Central Park South



Drawn for this novella by the author.

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HOUSEKEEPER OF THE CITY

A Novella

by Surjan

Manhattan, 2021 — 2026

Text co-authored with AI assistance.
All imagery conceived, 3D modeled in Rhinoceros 3D,
and rendered in V-Ray by the author, without AI.